



**God our Father,
we gather in this city
where your word was preached by Peter and Paul.
Help us to hear your word;
So that we may do it, so that it may challenge us, so that it may change us,
so that we may be witnesses to it.
May the Spirit inspire and strengthen us to live your word
in the new world in which we are called
to be priests after the image of your Son.
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.**

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Monsignor Paddy Corish gave a talk at the Maynooth Union on the year when he celebrated his Golden Jubilee. He said, "a Golden Jubilee is a most important moment in the life of any priest because it marks the transition from the hope that things might last my time to the glorious realisation that they have lasted my time." That feeling may be stronger than we might like to think for those of us whose Golden Jubilee is not so far away. It is evident that the shape of the Church in Ireland will be unrecognisable within fifteen years or so. The changes will be even more dramatic than the difference between the Church before Vatican II and the Church of today. People are gradually waking up to that prospect. I don't know if you find it as irritating as I do when people imagine that we priests are so out of touch that we don't even realise how bad our situation is. The fact is that we have been living with these changes and challenges for many years now – resisting, I trust, the temptation to simply hope that things will last our time.

People tell us that, if we realised how bad things were in the Church, we, priests and bishops, would be doing something dramatic about it. They don't seem to understand that anyone who reacts by saying "somebody" (that is somebody else) should be doing something about it, is part of the problem!

It is not that I want to depress us all, but it is no harm to begin our reflections on caring for the Lord's flock by taking a swift overview of the situation in which we minister – its challenges, and also its opportunities

The challenges are all too visible:

- ❖ The pain and disillusionment that we have all felt, not just since the Ferns and Ryan and (soon) the Dublin Reports, but for the last fifteen years or so, as we have seen friends and colleagues, maybe priests we particularly admired, or maybe close friends, revealed as abusers of innocent children. The allegations of cover-up or at least incompetence, which are shocking and disheartening.
- ❖ The way in which the phenomenon of child sexual abuse has been presented as if it were exclusively or even principally perpetrated by Catholic clergy.
- ❖ The widespread perception of what is called "the institutional Church" as unfeeling and uncaring. [To be honest, we sometimes feel that way ourselves in how we react to the Church, We can, perhaps empathise with the story told about the late Archbishop Fisher of Canterbury – seen as a saintly man by those who were close to him. He was, it is said, found pounding his desk one day saying; "I hate the Church of England!"]
- ❖ The polarisation between people on opposing wings of the Church, which can become very bitter and can lose sight of the Christ's commandment – we are to love one another as he loves us. We are beginning to see this again in the Lisbon Treaty debates. Perhaps the most

disturbing thing about these conflicts is the ease with which the protagonists seem to be able to judge the motives and the inner thoughts of their opponents!

- ❖ Declining statistics of Mass attendance and vocations make us wonder whether our task is nothing more than palliative care of a dying institution.
- ❖ The central features of the Catholic community as we have known it – religious orders, Catholic schools and hospitals, a Catholic identity and culture, and most importantly the Catholic family – are either in danger of disappearing altogether or are under serious pressure. The Catholic identity is weakening in all sorts of ways and we struggle to foster a sense of the parish or the cluster or the pastoral area as a community.
- ❖ The realisation that, for all that is good about our history, we have failed to provide a significant number of laity – or indeed priests – who are willing or able to hold their own in the public forum, and particularly in the media, on matters of faith. Once one has mentioned Breda O'Brien, Ronán Mullan, David Quinn, Brendan Purcell and maybe five or six other names, you would begin to struggle to find other examples,
- ❖ Last but not least, the challenge of people who are openly hostile.

I'm sure that each of you could add your own challenges!

CREDIBILITY

But, in a sense, the real challenge, and the real opportunity lies much deeper– the challenge of the credibility of faith today and of the credibility of the Church as the messenger of Good News.

- ❖ Many people find the very idea of faith incredible – ideas such as the existence of a God – not some impersonal “power”, but the God who loves us individually and who wishes us to share in the infinite flow of Trinitarian life, the life death and resurrection of the eternal Son through whom all things were made, his real presence in the Eucharist, life after death do not fit comfortably into the world view that surrounds us. The opening lines of *Deus Caritas Est* point to the core of the problem: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”¹.
- ❖ The fact that in modern life the hunger for God, which is deep in every human being, seems to be largely, if not totally, unrecognised in the lives of many people. As someone put it, God is missing but not missed. But God is missed and the emptiness of much of modern life testifies to that! We are crying out for the hope that can only be God.
- ❖ The Church's moral teaching is regarded as absurd and unrealistic, on various issues such as the permanence of marriage, the inviolability of human life from conception to natural death, and sexual morality; it is regarded as being not just absurd but inhuman in its questioning of research on embryonic stem cells, or opposition to the idea of extending the right to marry to single sex couples, or in its opposition to euthanasia when someone who is living in pain and in total dependence on others pleads to be allowed to die with dignity. This situation is not the product of desire of the institutional church to compel everyone to conform. It arises because the moral teaching of the Church is fundamentally about the Christian vision of the human person, the meaning of human life and the quest for the infinite truth, and hope and love that give our lives a new horizon and a decisive direction. In the absence of that vision the full positive meaning of the teaching is not seen. Similarly the failure to glimpse the true wonder of human dignity, even apart from Judaeo-Christian revelation obscures the fact that these are matters that concern the full flourishing of persons.

The Church's beliefs and teachings, the idea that the Church is the sign of Christ's presence and of Christ's Gospel, has suffered a huge loss of credibility. The truth is, however, that the crisis– the moment of choice that is before us – is a moment of opportunity. It is the key to deepening our joy in the priesthood and the energy and focus of our care for God's People. The joy of Easter always has emerged through the pain and death of Calvary. This crisis points us towards the foundations of our faith. That is what I want to reflect on with you today.

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

The sort of lives that people live today does not seem to leave room for talking about God. We talk about salvation or redemption, or grace, but what echo, if any, do such words have in people's lives?. Pope John Paul described this deafness well. In a letter he wrote to mark the fourth centenary of the death of St John of the Cross, he spoke about the wars and genocides and the suffering that the world lived through in the twentieth century:

The term dark night is now used of all of life and not just a phase of the spiritual journey... (John of the Cross) does not try to give to the appalling problem of suffering an answer in the speculative order; but in the light of the Scripture and of experience he discovers and sifts out something of the marvellous transformation which God effects in the darkness...²

The fear that life may be absurd can either raise the issue of faith or it can lead to a deadening of the deeper questions. Without faith, there is no answer to the problem of suffering except to try to ignore it as much as possible, which we do most of the time. Failure to face the deeper questions leads to a life that has no depth. Aidan Matthews says:

If the twentieth century has proved... anything, it was surely that words without metaphysics, praxis without prayer, will be the extinction of our species; that's not a spiritual slogan or rallying cry for recruitment to the cause, but a simple psychological observation... an ethics that has abdicated the perspective of eternity, a witness that relinquishes worship, has already, in the supposed epoch of the Enlightenment, established a habit of moving from Godless humanism to godforsaken inhumanity in a single, lethal lifetime³.

In a recent book, Desmond Fennell offers a radical view of the emptiness, the falseness of the foundations on which the United States – with Europe following in its path – has tried to build a civilisation which would replace the old European values by a system in which powerful combination of government/media/business/finance would lead people to accept a liberal system whose roots did not lie in anything beyond the immediate and the visible. It would studiously avoid the deeper questions about the meaning of life. It created a lifestyle based on possessions and on a false equality which ignores sexual, racial, moral and religious differences. It is also founded on the assumption that this way of life was morally superior to anything that had gone before. Yet it produces high levels of unhappiness and frustration. Furthermore, this “superior” life style would be seen as having an obligation to bring other cultures into this enlightened new civilisation – imposed by force if necessary. One may think his analysis is overstated, but his description of where this would lead sounds ominously familiar:

“The life span of the American system is determined by the very transient nature of the two factors which by supplying its ersatz sense enable it to exist. Ultimately, for one reason or another, the continuous increase of the collective and individual power to buy and do – which provides its main ersatz sense and social glue – will cease. And its vaunted moral superiority over all previous or existing lives will become an irrelevant twaddle. Nothing will then remain to prevent direct and continuous impact of the system's senselessness on the consciousness of westerners, young and old, or to make that senseless and unloved life framework seem a good life”⁴.

We are living in a world which badly needs to ask itself fundamental questions about its values and goals. These are questions that require a certain depth of listening, which is often difficult to achieve in our busy, noisy world. In his letter on the importance of the Eastern Christian tradition, Pope John Paul speaks of the temptation to avoid the deeper questions. The Christians of the East, he says, “perceive that one draws close to this presence above all by letting oneself be taught an adoring silence, for at the culmination of the knowledge and experience of God is God's absolute transcendence”. But we are often unable to be silent for fear of meeting ourselves, for fear of “feeling the emptiness that asks itself about meaning”. “All, believers and non - believers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak”. The absolutely transcendent One may speak in unforeseen ways, through unexpected people, or in surprising circumstances; only attentive listening, adoring silence, will allow us to hear and to understand what the Other says to us⁵.

The crucial element in any attempt to speak about faith today is to touch the deep questions about the meaning of human life – the dignity and destiny of the human person on the one hand and the ways in

² JOHN PAUL II, *Master in the Faith*, 14.

³ MATTHEWS, A., *In the Poorer Quarters*, Veritas, Dublin, 2007, p. 214

⁴ FENNEL, D., *Ireland after the end of Western Civilisation*, Athol Books, Belfast, 2009, p. 24.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Oriente Lumen*, 16.

which that dignity seems to be threatened and destined for ultimate extinction on the other. In lesser ways we have to be able to speak to a world in which human vulnerability reveals itself in the most unexpected ways. These are the questions to which faith speaks. But they must be touched by a mind really open to the questions – not brushing them aside in case they may prove to be too painful or disturbing. You can see examples of this deliberate blindness all around. What if we are close to a point when the damage done to our climate is irreversible – or even past that point? What if 'peak oil' – the point at which oil will become ever more scarce and expensive – is already in the past? What if the phenomenon that we like to call the "recession" is really a more or less permanent shift of economic and political power from the West to the East? What if the threat of global terrorism is actually beyond our power to stop and it escalates into the use of biological and nuclear weapons in major cities.

Faith is meant to be something which transforms the way we see and live in every aspect of our lives. Pope John Paul said something in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* which deserves to be taken seriously: "It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but 'Christians at risk'⁶.

To put it another way, there can be no opening of a person's heart to God unless that person has a real sense of his or her need for God. It is not that affluence and power and status are bad things, but if they take the place in our lives that belongs only to God they prevent us opening ourselves to the only hope that is big enough to save us⁷. These are, of course the three temptations of Christ in the desert, to give possessions, power and popularity a place they ought not to have. The point of the temptations is not that these things are evil, but that they must not be put in the place of God – not by bread alone do we live.

We can speak effectively of faith only if we keep reminding ourselves of the deeper underlying question. Anyone who wishes to engage in dialogue has to experience their need so as to be able to witness to the Gospel promise, which is the light that even the deepest darkness cannot overcome. The pattern of the incarnation is that the Son of God became one with us, sharing our vulnerability, our anguish and our death, in order to be able to lead us into the life beyond suffering and death.

Not the least of the problems about the fact that so many people view the Church as an institution is that no one believes that an institution, a structure, can feel hunger and pain and vulnerability. Insofar as a priest is seen as the functionary of an institution, the same perception will block his attempts to communicate. People will not hear the Gospel from a source which they do not perceive as sharing in the anguish of the deepest human questions. Only someone who knows the suffering can convincingly communicate the wonder of God's response. We may return to this question later on.

REPENT AND BELIEVE

Perhaps those of us who were trained around the time of the Second Vatican Council are still influenced by the idea of the priest as standing above the fray, above the doubts and the weakness that mark every human life. If the pain of the last ten years has forced us to begin to acknowledge our weakness and our fallibility that may be a very positive thing. In our preaching are we tempted to speak from a pedestal – not necessarily talking down to people, but talking as if we never had a difficulty or a doubt or a struggle with our weakness, as if we needed to appear unshakeable so as not to unsettle them? Maybe what we were really teaching was that whole hearted living of the Christian is beyond people like them, with all their doubts and failures? If that were what we were doing, it would be like the Pharisee lecturing the tax collector. It is hard to see how the mercy of God can be effectively preached by someone who shows no signs of needing it!

Eamonn Duffy speaks of this in the context of clerical sexual abuse. Having said that priests were immeasurably better educated and better behaved than their predecessors, he goes on:

But a less desirable spin off has been the emergence alongside the raising of standards of a culture of denial, a concern to protect the Church's good name, sometimes at all costs. This has often been maintained by a sort of collusive fiction in which clergy and laity alike have averted their eyes from the realities of human frailty within the institution.

⁶ JOHN PAUL; II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 34.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 31.

That condition has often gone along with an authoritarian mind-set which insists that 'we never make mistakes', and which interprets criticism as disloyalty"⁸

It is a painful lesson. In the fifties and the sixties, we were attracted by the idea of the priest as someone that was looked up to. We wanted to be priests because we saw priestly ministry as a life of commitment, generosity and integrity. We came to the priesthood, often following the example of men whose lives seemed to us to be entirely admirable. In some very painful cases, they turned out to have feet of clay. Too many priests have not been what they seemed to be. Behind the often entirely genuine prayer and dedication, there were hideous secrets about the molestation of children and the devastation of children's lives. [That, incidentally, is how we must see the people who were abused – not as angry adults, but to see in them the little children whose innocence was taken advantage of and destroyed.] Now we find ourselves, drawing consolation from the fact that we are no worse than other adult males in positions of care and trust in relation to children! It is a far cry from the ideals we started out with!

But the painful lesson is not all negative. Without a sense of our weakness and our sinfulness, we can never appreciate the wonder of God's gift. The Gospel and indeed the whole of the Scriptures give a special place to the poor, the *anawim*. It is the poor who are open to the hope of a better future: "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers" (Jer 20:13).

We can only reflect on these issues if we begin by recognising that gift of care and mercy which God continuously promises and gives.

The importance of this contemplation on the basics is stressed also in a challenging address that Paul VI gave to his priests when he was Archbishop of Milan:

Let us try to keep our eyes open, to learn how to marvel... St. Augustine says, 'The fountain is greater than my thirst.' And I must marvel at this. I must always be ready to marvel, to feel amazement; and the old things that I have celebrated for so many years must always appear to me as something new. The birth of Jesus, his passion, his death, the coming of the Holy Spirit. All these mysteries that gradually will become habit, must become fresh again, immediate, and I must rejoice at their greatness... To see! To see!⁹

There is a remarkably challenging passage in *Evangelium Vitae*. In speaking about the Gospel of Life Pope John Paul stressed the importance of what he called 'the contemplative outlook' which is necessary if we are truly to celebrate the Gospel of life:

It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image.¹⁰

It is important that we experience our deep need because it enables us to see the transcendent light more clearly. That is why the Easter Vigil is celebrated after nightfall; the light of the paschal candle shines more clearly in the darkness. [Not like the priest who told me that he celebrated it with all the lights blazing because, if anybody tripped up, I would be sued!"] The darkness of our need can be experienced not as pain and emptiness and absurdity but as a hunger for God. We look more deeply into the darkness because we know that the deepest truth is found in God who dwells in inaccessible light. The hope and meaning we seek can only be a gift precisely because it exceeds our hopes, our abilities even our wildest fantasies; Pope Benedict says: "The fact that it comes to us as a gift is actually part of hope. God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety"¹¹.

But we can awaken an awareness of that hunger and darkness in others and help them to see the wonder of God's truth only if we ourselves experience that darkness and the light that darkness cannot overpower.

⁸ DUFFY, E., *Faith of Our Fathers*, Continuum London 2004, pp. 155, 156.

⁹ MONTINI, J. B., *The Priest*, Helicon Dublin 1963, p. 137.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

¹¹ *Spe Salvi*, 31.

BEWILDERED AND RESTLESS

In previous eras, the questions of God, of death and meaning, of judgement and eternal life were close to people's consciousness. That is not so true today. That is why funerals and weddings and baptisms can be very important opportunities for teaching the Gospel. Such moments arise in the life of every individual, since no one can escape the experiences of illness and bereavement of birth and of commitment. We need, however, to be alert if we are to detect and respond to the relatively rare moments when such questions may be close to the surface in a more than individual way.

One of the reasons why traditional sacred words (grace, incarnation, salvation, hell, heaven) seem to have lost their power is that the experience to which they are addressed is pushed out of public discourse and when the questions do arise, as they do at certain points in every life, many people do not look to the Church or the Gospel for a response that would give meaning. After a big tragedy people often turn to counsellors. Even if they do turn to the Church, the thrust of society is that, even after a shattering bereavement, a person should get back to normal as quickly as possible. Otherwise they are embarrassing reminders of the questions that we prefer not to face. The tradition whereby bereaved people wore signs of mourning for several months was a recognition of the human reality that we prefer to bundle out of sight. We no longer as a society have the language to express or to share these deeply human questions

But that is also why situations that pose the questions of death and meaning to us all at the same time can have such a powerful and lasting impact. famines and wars,, assassinations, terrorist bombs, gangland killings, economic disasters like job losses, repossession of homes and a catastrophic decline in our ability to educate the young, and to re-educate adults for a swiftly changing world, our inability as a society to care for the sick, as well as the more positive mysteries of human love, the birth of a child, marriages and such occasions when we are full of hope all of these kinds of events, good and bad, face us with the big questions.

When death comes in the middle of any ordinary day, by a road accident or a plane crash or a terrorist act; when it strikes someone young and healthy, or someone who is popular and wealthy and influential it brings sorrow and anguish to the close members of their families. But it also brings to all of us the uncomfortable realisation that possessions, power and popularity are not the meaning of life. It brings home to us that everybody is vulnerable.

God does not come to surround us with an armour plate of invulnerability. If we face the uncertainty of life, if we recognise the unreliability of our hopes and expectations, if we seriously reflect on the inevitability of death, we may begin to see how extraordinary the truth is. God's eternal Son is born in a stable in order to be vulnerable with us. At the end of his life the arm of Jesus is bared once more - and brutally nailed to a cross.

There is no armour plate strong enough to protect us from death and suffering. We are not indestructible. It is self-deception to imagine we are secure and indispensable because of our achievements, reputation, possessions or talents. The call to look into the darkness in order to find the God who dwells in unapproachable light must in many instances, therefore, be less programmed, more ready to respond to crises and experiences that arise, sometimes unpredictably, in the life of individuals and in the life of society. The world, which appears to be self-contained and without the capacity to hear the deepest questions, can, sometimes quite unexpectedly, reveal itself to be, in the Pope John Paul's phrase, "bewildered and restless".¹²

HELPLESSNESS

Some of the unease and darkness has a moral basis. It is often said that there is, in the modern world, a lack of the sense of sin. This is undoubtedly true, but paradoxically, it is also true that there is, in the modern world, a great sense of guilt. Pope John Paul, in *Dives in Misericordia*, speaks of the threats which exist in our world through war and oppression. Then he says:

All this is happening *against the background of the gigantic remorse* caused by the fact that, side by side with wealthy and surfeited people and societies living in plenty and ruled by consumerism and pleasure, the same human family contains individuals and groups *that are suffering from hunger...* That is why moral uneasiness is destined to become even more acute. It is obvious that a fundamental defect, or rather a series of defects, indeed a defective machinery is at the root of contemporary economics and

¹² JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 61,

materialistic civilisation, which does not allow the human family to break free from such radically unjust situations.¹³

The divisions between wealth and poverty are much more acute in the world where modern communications make the reality immediately present. The contrast between what appears on the television screen in the corner of the room and what is happening in the rest of the room can be startling if we stop to think about it.

We see people exposed to the most hostile weather conditions; we see children dying of starvation while we are actually in the process of eating a good meal sitting in a well heated or air conditioned house watching on a flat screen television, possibly in high definition, and with all the sports and movie channels on tap in case we get bored with "all the bad news".

It is uncomfortable to realise that our trivial expenditure – on a biscuit and a cup of coffee – could feed a starving child. It is evident, that some of our brothers and sisters are suffering in ways we can hardly imagine while we live in relative comfort.

At the same time there is a realisation that greater personal generosity, desirable, useful and obligatory though that is, will not cure the defective machinery at the root of the problems. We do not know how to repair the economic system. But we have all seen in recent months how defective it is! The greatest economic and political minds in the world are realising that they are not too sure how the system works and how or whether it can be repaired.

Yet we also know in our hearts that it is not enough to say "somebody should do something!" One of the chief forms of social sinfulness is to fail to eliminate or to limit social evils "out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through the secret complicity of indifference... (through taking) refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world".¹⁴

We know that, in spite of the present downturn, there has been enormous technological development and wealth creation in recent decades. Yet justice for all seems to remain beyond our grasp. And we know that in the wider picture of the human race throughout history, millions of our brothers and sisters are beyond any material help that we will ever be able to give, because they are already dead. Some of the overruns on public capital programmes – motorways, public buildings and so on, some of the wastage on expenses, could have done endless good in the poorest countries of the world.

So the hunger for a world of fairness and peace is suppressed because we feel that it is unrealistic. As with the hunger for meaning and the hunger for perfection, what is needed is not to diminish this hunger but to experience it more fully. The experience of that hunger is another crack in the wall of self-sufficiency. The meaning of human life cannot simply depend on the time or place of one's birth. If life is absurd for some human beings, it is absurd for all of us. That threat of absurdity may open people's minds to hear of the God who offers vindication and justice to the living and the dead. In the light of such a vision, the "gigantic remorse" can be transformed into a sense of sin against the God whose mercy is infinite. It can thus become a source of hope. We can look straight into the darkness and begin to see the light.

Only a person who has felt the hunger for justice can begin to appreciate the God who is the source and guarantee of the dignity of every human being. The real challenge is not to make hopeless attempts to achieve the impossible. The real challenge is to see that the meaning of human life lies not in the acquisition of goods but in sharing ourselves. This was one of the ideas expressed by the Irish bishops in the pastoral letter on the economy published at a time that now seems a long time ago, when our problem was how to deal with prosperity!

Divine revelation helps us to see that either wealth is shared, or its owners become the owned and are diminished in themselves. This is a message that is liberating for rich and poor alike, each of whom is invited to see through the falseness of making material possessions the goal of human life and to experience the joy that the Spirit of God gives in the act of sharing.¹⁵

The hunger for justice is a field in which we are faced with questions whose ultimate answers can only lie in what Pope Benedict called "the great hope (which) can only be God"¹⁶ – so too with the hunger

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 11, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 16

¹⁵ IRISH CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE, *Prosperity with a Purpose*, Veritas 1999, 173.

¹⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 31.

for peace. The question, however, is how to begin to awaken that hunger, since it means facing questions and challenges that many people, including ourselves, would, in our deepest hearts, would prefer not to face.

AWAKENING THE HUNGER

The complexity of modern life is both a challenge and an opportunity to recognise God's presence. It might be instructive to return to the very beginning of the mission of Jesus. Not only did he begin his preaching with the words, "Repent and believe the good news" (Mt 4:17), but he had first faced the temptations to the distortion of his mission and the established his priorities in the light of his Father's will. Satan tempted him to direct his mission in terms of possessions, popularity and power. These are substitute 'fast foods' which cannot satisfy our deep hunger and which, in fact, disguise it, but never permanently.

We sing, "Like a shepherd he feeds his flock". Perhaps the shepherd, the priest, in our world has to begin by allowing the flock to face and to feel their hunger.

Even committed Christians live most of their lives in circumstances where the Gospel has not been inculturated. Multi-national companies, the Internet, the advances of technology, growing urbanisation, globalisation of the economy, multi-culturalism, none of these have existed in the same way before. Similarly it is many centuries since the Church faced the kind of scandals that we have been facing, or the sudden collapse of practice and the abandonment of organised religion – was North Africa the last time that such a collapse occurred? – and it supplied the Church with a seemingly endless list of titular sees. In a couple of centuries from now, will men be appointed auxiliary bishops in Korea or China with titles like Dublin, Armagh or even Limerick?

On a brighter note, there are some signs that recession has driven people back to asking fundamental questions as to what the Celtic Tiger was all about; it is a very high price for the poorest in society to pay so that the rest can ask the basic questions. But perhaps it shows us that all is not yet lost.

The danger is that large sections of the lives of believers remain unevangelised because they are living their faith in situations that are unfamiliar and unanticipated. But these are also opportunities.

Although questions arise for different individuals in an often unpredictable way, there are broad areas where the dialogue should be attempted on a more ongoing basis – reflection on the social teaching of the Church, the implications of a deep understanding of human dignity for how one understands the economy, work, social justice, health care ethics; reflection with artists, scientists, health care professionals, the media. The three encyclicals and the other teaching of Benedict XVI point powerfully in the direction of the areas we need to reflect on and preach. In particular, *Caritas in Veritate* is a reflection on the importance of the concepts of Truth and Charity, understood in the light of Christ, are the key for understanding the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Perhaps most important of all is the dialogue which needs to take place in the heart of every believer, and that means in the heart of every priest, for if we fail to experience the hunger for meaning, we cannot involve others in a dialogue based on that search. But if we do, then we can recognise, as Aidan Matthews puts it "that God's embrace of us, far from being the bland, benumbing bore that the secularists caricature as the chloroform of faith, infuses so much meaning into life that pathos and the pain of it are often unendurable"¹⁷

**Mary our Mother,
You offered yourself to the Father as his handmaid
so that his will might be done in you.
A sword pierced your heart as your Son died on Calvary.
May our hearts be touched by the suffering we meet and the suffering we endure,
May our ministry teach by word and example that weakness and suffering
are signs of the weakness in which God's strength is revealed.
May our hearts be open to the hope that was revealed to us
in the horror and the triumph of the Cross.
We make our prayer through Christ, your crucified and risen Son.**

¹⁷ *In the Poorer Quarters*, p. 223-224.

