

Address to the Supreme Council of the Knights of St Columba, Glasgow October 2007

Change has been sweeping Europe, the church and the world. Who would have foretold the way our church has changed in the last few years – large numbers of new people from Eastern Europe, India and Africa. We live with a degree change which no other generation has. One area of change with which the Church is very familiar is the deep and profound developments which are taking place in family life. Single parent families are now very common (22% of all families in the UK): they may be the result of a broken marriage or of the free choice of girls who have chosen not to bring up families as part of a partnership or families whose mothers were left pregnant. Remarriage of divorced Catholics is now common. Couples prefer to live together rather than marry. We can only guess as to what will be the norms and conventions of the future. As the Knights of St Columba begin a year of spiritual preparation for the ninetieth anniversary of the foundation of the Order the question we have to ask ourselves is where is God in this sea of change?

The reason for considering change in our lives is not that change never happened before, of course it did. But never at the same pace, never in such a revolutionary way, never in a way which affects everything from the freedom of nations in eastern Europe to the attitudes we have towards the freedom of individuals to live in peace in their homes in our own localities without being the subject of wife-beatings or disadvantaged because of the lack of family structure. Change is so widespread that we must learn to manage it or go under.

Confidence in the Future

My interest then is in how we keep faith in this changing world: faith in ourselves and our role, faith in the family, faith in the church as wider community, faith in the education system. Perhaps even, how do we keep our faith? Faith in God!

Faith is the right word....our communities for what they are worth, are based on faith. It is our common faith in our Lord which unites us, makes us one in him. That simple statement brings me to the key word of this reflection, CONFIDENCE. A ready definition of that word is believing together. Confidence is, I think, a theological word. It is not just about being self-assured. The balance of emphasis between believing and together, shifts from one to the other and back again. It is in being part of a community that our lives take on meaning. But it is in sharing the common culture of Faith that we have community in the first place. This dynamism between faith and community is well expressed in the word, "confidence". When we have confidence, then, we are empowered. "Confidence" is not a static attribute, like have blue eyes. It is something dynamic which is probably another name for the Spirit of our Lord at work in us.

Confident Prayer - New Vision

In our lives, especially since they are empowered by the Spirit, our starting point has to be prayer. Faith is strengthened and grows especially through prayer, so long as we really meet Christ in Prayer. But prayer as the basis for our relationship with God is essential for our faith.

It is from this basis of prayer that we can have confidence in the future. We are able to look at everything afresh with new VISION. Habit forces us very quickly to see things, not as they really are, but in the closed categories in which we have put them...and it does not take long to organise our own little world and our scale of values... This way of looking at things is probably the major cause of growing "old", though this new kind of cataract can affect a person at any age.

Christ after all taught us to see things, people, events in a new way, different from what we are used to. He preached a kingdom where things are turned upside down, in which the last come first, the sinful woman is preferred to the pharisee and the repentant thief goes straight to heaven!

Christ reveals the true face of everything. We must go beyond masks, appearances and facades. It is not often that people, and everything that affects them: love, hope, challenge, joy, grief, suffering, are seen in their real true colours, in the raw as it were.

Anyway, we must go beyond what we can see with human eyes. Things are more than they seem to be. They are also signs of the times, paths towards God, the presence of God, the word of God. We must see the grace of God at work in the "better world" which is striving, somewhat painfully, to come into being. Behind all reality there is an "ultimate truth" which we find very difficult to grasp but which will inevitably bring us to God in some way or another.

We must take a new look at ourselves. Many people have said YES to the Lord. What have we done with the yes? We must all take a new look....but with the eyes of a prophet. The same eyes as before, but now they see further. How? Does not our very vocation by virtue of our baptism make us prophets of a new world, which is in the process of developing? If this were so, the message which we preach and teach would not be readymade words. Words which are really for nobody...but they would touch people, institutions, and communities. We would be able to communicate with others and help them hear a message which would echo in the very depth of their being. Real dialogue becomes possible. For is this not much more a question of vision than speech? Before a word is spoken or written the dialogue we have with each other must spring from a vision that is sharpened by love.

It is amazing how our ideas change when we pray over them. To pray over one's ideas means to think over them in the light of God, under his gaze. Our own outlook would certainly change and become closer to God's point of view if only we learned to pray over things in this way. My brothers our world is full of new opportunities to show how confident we are as Catholics, as Knights of St Columba. The new communities respect people of Faith, people whose behavior is based on Christian principles. We don't need to be reticent anymore or apologise for being Christian and believing what we do. Let us have a new confidence, rooted in our reinvigorated spiritual life, so that we can be Christ's body in this new and changing world.

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