



"Love the Church - you must be joking!"

Bishops Youth Catechesis

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Some years ago, as I was getting ready to celebrate Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, I managed to watch a few minutes of "Carols by Candlelight" on television. One of the artists introduced her selection of Christmas carols, all with an explicitly religious message, with the remark that at Christmas we celebrate the birth of Christ, who came to bring peace, not religion! No-one seemed to think that this statement was surprising or that it needed challenging!

Sometime previously, in the course of a talk I was giving to a group of Christians from various denominations, I drew a link between Christ, the Eucharist and the Church, suggesting that these three were absolutely joined together. At the time I didn't think this was a particularly daring or controversial thing to say. And yet, one member of the audience was greatly offended by my suggestion that belonging to a Church would enable you to come into contact with Christ in a way which otherwise wouldn't be possible.

On another occasion, I remember reading an article on a famous tennis player, now retired, who told the interviewer that although he was brought up a Catholic, and his family still practiced their religion, he was much more drawn to Buddhism because this religion, unlike Catholicism, was a spiritual religion.

On yet another occasion, as I was driving home, I heard a discussion on the radio about whether or not you could be a good person without believing in God. The whole thrust of the discussion seemed to be that going to Church certainly didn't make someone a better person and that some of the very best people in the world didn't believe in God or go to Church. The implication was, of course that religion and Church weren't all that important.

And more recently I came across a book with the title "*Love Jesus, hate the Church.*"

It was all of these things – and I could give lots of other examples – which convinced me to give my talk this evening the title "*Love the Church – you must be joking*". It was also all of these things which convinced me that it would be worth sharing with you today some thoughts on who Jesus really is, what the Church really is, and how Jesus and the Church are like two sides of the one coin: you can't have one side without having the other as well.

Of course it is true, and we are all deeply conscious of it at this present time in our history, that many members of our Church, including our clergy and our leaders, have betrayed in the most shocking ways everything that the Church stands for. The sexual abuse of children and young people is both a terrible and a serious crime and I would be the last person to try to minimize or dismiss the awful damage this has done to so many victims and survivors of this abuse, their families and friends, the Church community and our wider society. In his own time Jesus was



extraordinarily hard on the religious leaders of his own day who did not, as he put it, practice what they preached. He called them blind guides and whited sepulchers. No doubt he would say the same about those in our communities who have betrayed people so badly. In the light of these terrible things it is no wonder that some people say, *“Love the Church? – you must be joking”* or *“Love Jesus but hate the Church”*.

In addition to these shocking failures on the part of so many in the Church, there are many other things which people object to about our Catholic faith. I won't list them all here – you would be aware of many of them already from contact with your friends or even from your own thinking about your experience of the Church – but whether they concern the teachings of the Church, which some people find very hard, or the liturgy of the Church, which some people find boring and uninspiring, or the poor example given by people who put themselves forward as good Catholics but who live lives of great selfishness these are the things which make people walk away from the Church or even oppose it actively. As we acknowledge that what I am describing is a very common attitude among people this afternoon, it is good to remember that there were many things about Jesus himself that some people in his own time, and ever since, haven't liked or have found too hard. The reality seems to be that most people in Jesus' own time didn't accept him or follow him. But at least they were honest enough to admit that they couldn't accept what he was saying or doing: they took him at this word, didn't accept what he was saying and walked away. It can be a little different these days. Many people try to create a Jesus that they can be comfortable with, one who doesn't challenge them too much. They pick and choose the bits about Jesus that they are at ease with and conveniently forget about the rest. And people can do the same with the Church: they want to turn the Church into something that will leave them comfortable – they don't want the Church to be a challenge to them.

Because I think this is a really important issue what I would like to do this afternoon is to put two questions to you and invite you to really think hard about how you would answer them. I also want to share with you how I would answer them – or at least suggest a couple of ways in which we might begin to answer them.

The first question is “Who is Jesus?” and the second question is “what is the Church?” This afternoon I would like to invite all of us to think about both of these questions, and because they are so closely connected I will talk about them more or less together.

As regards the first question “Who is Jesus?” I have to be honest and admit that it is not really my question at all. It is the question which Jesus himself asked his disciples. In St Matthew's gospel, at a certain stage in the unfolding story, Matthew tells us that Jesus became curious as to what people were saying about him. He gathered his twelve disciples around him and said to them, *“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”* Of course “Son of Man” was a phrase which Jesus often used about himself. I think we can imagine that Jesus is wondering just how his mission is going. *“Am I succeeding with people? Do they understand me? Do they believe in me? Have they got it?”*

The disciples give him the answer, and it is probably not the answer he is looking for. *“Well,”* they say to him, *“some people say that you are John the Baptist come back to life. Some say that you are Moses, or Elijah, or one of the great prophets.”* They are interesting answers because they show that, although the people realise that Jesus is someone special, they have really missed



the truth about him. All they can do is try to make sense of him in terms that they already understand. *“He is another great prophet, just like the ones we have had in the past.”*

These people are wrong of course. He is much more than just another great prophet.

I am sure that Jesus must have been disappointed by this answer, although he was probably not surprised. It is always hard for people to see that something completely new and unique is happening to them. Generally, people like the familiar and the predictable: although maybe that is one thing about you as young people that marks you out: maybe you are more open to the unexpected, to the really surprising, and to all the challenges that new situations can bring.

But to get back to the story: it goes on to tell us that Jesus then asks his disciples what **they** think about him. *“And you”* he says to them, *“who do you say that I am?”*

Simon Peter, who of course is the leader of the disciples, speaks up on their behalf. *“You are the Christ,”* he says, *“the Son of the Living God.”* And Peter is right. If we can speak in a human way, we might say that it would have done Jesus’ heart good to hear Peter speak those words. *“At least my closest friends and supporters understand me,”* he must have thought. *“At least they get it. I can afford to rely on them. I can afford to keep on trusting them.”*

While it is true that Peter, and most of the other disciples, do let Jesus down over and over again, and even desert him when he needs them the most, the thing about this particular story is that it shows us that you can get Jesus wrong, but you can also get him right. There are lots of wrong answers but there are also right answers.

What I want to suggest to you this evening, is that we have to work hard to make sure that we get Jesus right. What is the point of following him, after all, if what we are really following is a figment of our own imagination, or a creation of our own making, rather than the real person who was sent to us by God to reveal God’s face to us. If we put together a Jesus of our own creation, and then decide to follow this Jesus, we actually end up following ourselves – and if we do that we end up going round and round in circles!

The fact is, of course, that lots of people do get Jesus wrong. Just think of Dan Browne and his famous novel *The Da Vinci Code* and the film that was made of the book. The whole story is built on the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were really secret lovers, that Jesus didn’t really die on the cross, that the Church has known this all along and that there has been an incredible effort on the part of the Church for the last two thousand years to keep this terrible secret, even if it means having bishops and cardinals, and even popes, ordering the slaughter of anyone who threatened to reveal the secret. It makes for a great novel or film, but it has nothing to do with the truth.

This is really an extreme example of the way people get Jesus wrong, but there are lots of other examples as well. Some people think that Jesus was a great man who had a great message, but that after he died his followers made up a crazy story about him rising from the dead because they wanted to hang on to the special role they had as his closest followers. Of course this is partly true: Jesus was a great man with a great message, but if that was all he was then his followers would have died out under the pressure of the persecutions that the early Christian communities had to face.



People who think of Jesus as this great man often put him in the same category as other great men. Like Jesus, they say, so the Buddha, or Confucius, or Mohammed were great men who contributed a lot to humanity – even if, many would then go on to say, their followers have messed up their message by turning it into a religion.

If Jesus were here this afternoon and we could have a conversation with him, I think he would be as disappointed by these answers as he was by those which the people of his own time gave to the question of who he really is. And if he were here, and engaging in conversation with us, I think he would turn to us and ask us the very same question he asked his first disciples: *“But what about you – who do you say I am?”*

Before you jump in with your answer, let me make this suggestion. In the end the best place to go to find an answer is the gospels and the New Testament. We need to keep reminding ourselves that Jesus lived about two thousand years ago. We do not have video recordings or DVD presentations made during his lifetime. We do not have audio recordings of his sermons or his parables. He does not have his own blog or his own Facebook page. We cannot go to any of those things. But what we do have is the Gospels, written in the first 50 or so years after his death by people who either knew him themselves or belonged to communities which traced their beginnings back to him. If we want to know about him then that is the place to look. And let me just add here that now, as well as asking “Who is Jesus?” I am also beginning to ask about the Church and what it really is.

We do not have time to go into too much detail this afternoon, but let me say this. If Jesus is still a very attractive figure this afternoon; if people are still fascinated by him; if people still think his message is powerful and compelling and worth listening to - and millions upon millions of people do, including us - it is because we have the gospels which have kept the memory of Jesus alive for all of those two thousand years. There is no other Jesus, or at least no way to come in contact with the real Jesus, except through the pages of the New Testament and especially the gospels.

But let me also point this out: we only have the Gospels because we first had the Church. The gospels were written by the earliest disciples of Jesus. But before they wrote the gospels they were already telling the story of Jesus to each other. They were already sitting around of an evening saying to each other, *“Do you remember when Jesus said such and such? Do you remember when he cured that blind man? Do you remember that story he told us about the sheep that got lost? Do you remember that last evening when he shared the bread and wine with us and told us it was his body and his blood? Do you remember that awful day when he was crucified? Do you remember how amazed we were when we realized that he had risen from the dead?”*

And of course these early disciples of Jesus were not just sitting around reminiscing. They were also getting together as a community and celebrating their faith by doing just what Jesus told them to do at the Last Supper, by taking bread and wine and sharing it among themselves, knowing and believing that the bread and wine were in fact the Body and Blood of the Lord, given for them and given to them so that they could be in real communion and intimacy with him and with each other. And as well as this they were organising themselves around the apostles and the people the apostles were appointing to take their place as the leaders of the community. And they were looking after each other making sure that everyone was cared for, that no one was needy or



neglected. And on top of all this they were getting out among the people, sharing the story of Jesus and inviting people to become his disciples.

In other words, even before the gospels were written, the community of the disciples of Jesus was already “alive and kicking”. And it was this community, which we now call the Church, which eventually decided, in these early years, to put its stories and its beliefs in writing. In other words the Church gave birth to the Scriptures and for that reason the Scriptures will always be the book of the Church and the place where the Scriptures really belong, where they are at home, and where they can best be understood.

Well, just what is it that these Scriptures tell us about Jesus? They tell us lots of things, far too many for us to look at and reflect on this evening. So let me just mention a few.

First of all, and most importantly, they tell us that Jesus knew that he had a special and unique relationship with God who was his Father in a way that is not true for anyone else. Jesus called God his “*Abba*” and this is a word which expresses a very close and intimate and personal relationship. Jesus also spoke a lot about the fact that he had been sent by God in order to make the truth about God available for everyone. We might say that Jesus thought of himself as the one who came to reveal to us the face of God and the heart of God.

This is tremendously important. People have all kinds of strange ideas about God. Some think of God like an old man with a long beard sitting on a throne up in heaven somewhere. Others think of him as a kind of policeman watching and waiting for us to do something wrong and then working out just how to punish us. Others think of him as a kind of divine vending machine: you work out what you want, send your prayers up to God much as you would put some coins in a slot on the machine, and then what you have paid for with your prayers comes tumbling out. Another version of this is the Santa Claus God. If you are a good boy or girl then God will give you what you want.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, none of these ideas of God have much to do with the kind of God Jesus tells us about. The God of Jesus, the real God, is the God who says to people who have sinned, “*I do not condemn you – go and do not sin anymore.*” And how do we know this? Because it is what Jesus said to a woman who had been caught committing adultery and who was being condemned by everyone else. The God of Jesus, the real God, is the God who forgives us with no strings attached and no punishments demanded. And how do we know this? Because Jesus told us the story of the Prodigal Son, and of the Father who, when his son came back home after doing all the wrong things, threw a party to welcome him home. The God of Jesus, the real God, is the God who wants us to live rich and full and whole lives, not distorted and stunted and miserable lives. And how do we know this? Because when the leper came to Jesus and said to him, “*If you want to you can cure me,*” Jesus said to him in reply, “*Of course I want to: be cured.*” The real God, the God of Jesus, is a God who invites us to work with him and let him work through us, to heal the world. And how do we know this? Because when the people were hungry and had no food, Jesus multiplied the bread and the fish, but he gave them to the disciples and told them to give the food to the crowds.

What does all this mean? If you want to know what God is like have a look at Jesus as we find him in the gospels. If you want to know how God intends to deal with us, watch Jesus in action as he deals with other people in the gospels. If you want to know what matters to God, read the



gospels and work out what matters to Jesus. If you want to look into the heart of God, look at the heart of Jesus.

One of the many things which really stands out about Jesus is the fact that, almost from the very beginning of his work he called people to join him, become his disciples, create among themselves, with him at their centre, a real community of love and concern for each other, and then, as his community of disciples, carry his message and his love to the world. It is really very obvious when you read the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament as well that Jesus formed this special community and wanted it to be the bearer and the spreader of his message. In other words, Jesus formed the Church, created the Church, gave it its leadership in St Peter and the apostles, promised to send the Church the gift of his Holy Spirit, and made the Church his chosen and preferred way of continuing to be present and active in the world as its saviour, its healer, its brother and its servant.

Unfortunately, we do not have time to go into all the details of this today, but just think about how often Jesus draws his closest disciples aside and tries to help them to really understand what he is all about. Think about how he insists that as a community of disciples they are going to have to be ready to forgive each other over and over again. Think about how he prays to his Father that all his disciples will be united, that they will love one another, that they will work together to build up his kingdom. Think about how he appoints St Peter to be their leader. Think about how he gathers them together around the table at the Last Supper. Think about how, at the same last Supper, he promises that when he returns to his Father in heaven he will send them his Holy Spirit so that they, together, will be kept faithful to him. All of this is about the Church, about the community which Jesus gathers around him and which he wants to be the living sign of his ongoing presence in the world.

In the end, we say “yes” to the Church because it is what Christ is asking of us. We say “yes” to the Church because it is filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus promised to give us. We say “yes” to the Church because it is the way, Christ’s way, of continuing to offer his gift of life to the world. Because we care about the world, and not just the world out there but the world of our family and our friends and our nation, and we want the world, we want our world, to have the gift of life, we say “yes” to the Church.

You and I know that it is not always easy to say this “yes”. Sometimes we are put off or even disgusted by the way in which some of our leaders have let us down. Sometimes we feel that it is a Church for old people and we cannot find our place in it. Sometimes we feel as if most of our friends seem to be getting by pretty well without the Church and we feel a bit out of place – and maybe are even regarded as a bit odd if we do go to Church. Sometimes we look at people who go regularly to Church and we think that they are no better than anyone else so why bother with the Church? Sometimes some of the Church’s teachings seem too difficult or too challenging, or we cannot make sense of them. Sometimes we worry that the Church will limit us, fence us in, and stop us from enjoying life. And sometimes it is just too hard – it is easier to stay in bed after a late night than get up and go to Mass. There are all sorts of reasons why saying “yes” to the Church can be tough.

But it is what Jesus is asking of us. He knows that the “yes” can be difficult to give. He knows that our leaders can disappoint us. The first leaders, the apostles, disappointed him – but he never gave up on them. He knows that some of our friends might make it hard for us if they find



out that we go to Mass: he warned his first disciples to be ready for this kind of thing and to rely on him to help them to be faithful. He knows that we will find some of the teachings hard: so did many of the disciples, but in the end they decided that Jesus had the words of life and that the only thing to do was to stick with him, and with each other, even though it was not easy. He knows that sometimes it is easier to stay in bed than get up and go to Mass: the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane fell asleep when he needed them most – but he woke them up and asked them to keep watch with him.

Jesus knows that it is sometimes hard, but he still asks us to say “yes” to him and he still asks us to say “yes” to the Church.

And if we do, what will we find? First and foremost we will find him. We will find the one who promised us the gift of peace – and Jesus always keeps his promises. We will find the one who promised us the gift of abundant life – and he always keeps his promises. We will find the one who promised us the gift of his Spirit who would keep us true to him – and he always keeps his promises. We will find the gift of baptism and the gift of new life which baptism brings. We will find the gift of Reconciliation and the gift of forgiveness and new beginnings which Reconciliation always brings. We will find the gift of Confirmation, and the strength, courage and wisdom of God’s Spirit which the sacrament of Confirmation brings. And most of all we will find the gift of the Eucharist and the gift of intimate friendship and communion with Christ and with all of our brothers and sisters which the gift of the Eucharist always brings.

Our “yes” to the Church and our “yes” to Christ, which as I said at the start are just the two sides of the one coin, offer us so much – in fact they offer us everything. This is what Pope Benedict reminded us of during World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008. Let me finish with his words:

Dear friends, life is not governed by chance; it is not random. Your very existence has been willed by God, blessed and given a purpose (cf. Gen 1:28)! Life is not just a succession of events or experiences, helpful though many of them are. It is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful. It is to this end that we make our choices; it is for this that we exercise our freedom; it is in this – in truth, in goodness, and in beauty – that we find happiness and joy. Do not be fooled by those who see you as just another consumer in a market of undifferentiated possibilities, where choice itself becomes the good, novelty usurps beauty, and subjective experience displaces truth.

Christ offers more! Indeed he offers everything! Only he who is the Truth can be the Way and hence also the Life. Thus the “way” which the Apostles brought to the ends of the earth is life in Christ. This is the life of the Church.