

This is a letter I wrote which appeared in an edited version recently (May 2010) in our regional newspaper. It makes interesting reading.

**“We Catholics are under a lot of pressure. Reading the press, listening to the news would make one believe that being a Catholic or supporting the Hierarchy is synonymous with being a paedophile. Of course everyone will say “No way!” but look a little deeper. Our faith and Church is mocked and vilified, our leaders are running round like headless chickens and we, the Faithful, are struggling on, trying to hold faith with what appears to be a dying institution. So why do we bother with this struggle at all?”**

**Basically what I am asking is why do I, after 20 odd years of ever more depressing revelations about my Church keep going to Mass daily, keep praying, keep looking to the Church and her teaching for leadership and moral guidance? Or perhaps even more fundamentally, why am I a Catholic at all? I know there is more bad news to come, more disturbing revelations which can in no way be covered up or justified, more feelings of despair and hopelessness, shame and disgust.**

**And yet I shall continue going to Mass, shall continue to pray and shall most of all find my home in the bosom of the Church of Rome.**

**The first question I have to ask myself is, what is the Catholic Church? Is it a feel good experience, a fan club of certain “with it” clergy or a social thing I do on a Sunday? It is none of these. It is much more than any of these things can give or offer me. The Catholic Church is something deep inside all of us, something fundamental to our very nature; it is the reply to a question, a question first asked by the Lord in Caesarea Philippi 2000 years ago, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” If I see Jesus as a great teacher, the holiest man that ever lived, the man who knew God best of all and who lived God’s will the most profoundly of all humanity....I am missing the whole point. Yes, Jesus is all of these, but he is much more. He is as Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, the One who was to come into the world.”**

**The reason I am a Catholic is because I believe that the answer given by Peter is the true answer to that question.**

**The Catholic Church is the community founded by Jesus to preach and teach His message to all humanity. He himself was God but he founded a Church of sinners upon whom he sent the Holy Spirit to sanctify and guide. Essentially we come before God as sinners. If we think otherwise we are deluding ourselves. The basic message of Jesus “Behold, the Kingdom of God is at hand,” includes the forgiveness of sins, and this is what I need most of all, forgiveness for my sins.**

**I began life as an arrogant, self-centred young man. Gradually as I watched my life slip by I became aware that things were not all going my way. I saw the damage and hurt I had done to others, the trail of destruction I left behind. I saw relationships of all sorts turn sour, good friends and colleagues walk away, divorce and failure filled my life. For all my big plans I was going nowhere. Somewhere along the journey of life I began to realise that this was not a life that was fulfilling or happy. There was no direction or purpose, no joy or happiness. I was, as the old saying goes, between a rock and a hard place. About 1986 I began going to Mass regularly. Over time I became more and more interested in the teaching of the Church and began to read books and articles about doctrine. And as I did I began to see the wonderful beauty that is the Church, and more, I began to see that the Church herself is a mystery, something we can't explain, something close but distant, joyful and painful, beautiful with a pain-wrecked ugliness; I began to understand that the Church reflects our lives, our journey of faith, and most of all, in all of this pain and shame, it is Christ still suffering for and with us to this very day.**

**In the Catholic Church we see all the pain of our lives and of the community around us reflected in stark clear vision. When the proverbial hits the fan, Jesus, the head and heart of the Church is always there for us. To the world we "pathetic" people running to Mass every day are fools; but we know something the world refuses to believe, that Jesus is there, that he comes to us in the middle of our pain, that he walks with us in our hurts and our shame, and that his touch is a healing balm to our soul.**

**This paper is running headlines about The Church in Crisis. Yes, the institutional Church is in crisis. We are all ashamed, hurt, dismayed. But the Church in my heart and in the hearts of the thousands of believers who attend Mass daily is in no crisis. The Church of our heart is always secure for it is here we meet the Lord, in the silence of our heart, in the midst of our pain. If we look for him in big buildings we shall miss him, if we look for him in finery, he is not there, if we look for him in wealth we will be sorely disappointed. I will find Jesus in a palace or a brothel, in a mansion or a hovel, because he is in both.**

**The Church, the real Church, is the place where Jesus meets each of us. The buildings are only the places which society has foolishly built to facilitate public gatherings. A Mass said in an open field, as happened during the Penal times, has as much worth as a Mass in St Peter's in Rome.**

**And so we come to the mess of this past week or two; terrible memories of pain and hurt dragged up for unfortunate victims of sexual abuse, calls for Bishops to resign, calls for all sorts of sanctions on the Church and new**

**investigations. Where does the ordinary Catholic stand in the middle of all this?"**

**I feel ashamed, embarrassed, hurt and much more. I have no answer for the people who want heads to roll. I don't know who should or should not resign. But I shall be at Mass tomorrow as I was today. You see there is something very important that we Catholics have to remember; the Bishop in the palace is a sinner like the rest of us. He will make mistakes, operate out of fear, do things that are wrong, try to hide what is shameful. Basically he shall do and commit the same sins as the rest of us. And when he comes to celebrate Mass he comes like the rest of us, he comes as a sinner needing forgiveness.**

**But the Bishop is not the Mass. For a Catholic the celebrant is only standing in for Christ and no one is worthy of such a task.**

**The Bishops may have to resign in shame. The Church founded by Christ may be humiliated again. But the Church is always in trouble. Jesus died to take away our sins. We are all capable of evil. There is a terrible beauty at the heart of our Church and that beauty is the beauty of a Crucified Christ who walks with us in the midst of our pain. There, at the altar of the Lord, I receive the Bread of Life, food for my soul. I receive the strength to go on. I hope all those hurt in any way by our priests in their lives receive the same strength. And I hope the Bishops too remember that they are sinners in need of redemption."**