

“I call you friends”
Christ at the Centre of the Life and
Ministry of Priests

We have been called, each one of us, at a time of enormous challenge, to be witnesses to God’s truth and love, ministerial priests in the service of the Gospel. The call we have received is, as you know well, something truly wonderful. But, as you also know, the new and demanding challenges we face today can often put our faith and our hope and our love to the test. That’s why we need to live our lives every day from that centre which is Christ. Without Him we will never be able to find the energy necessary or indeed the basic inspiration and vision necessary to continue our work.

In this age, as in every age, there are voices in society, and indeed voices within ourselves – discouraging voices – which would persuade us that we are simply not adequate to the challenge confronting us. But worth remembering, in this context, is a brief, celebrated episode from the life of the Apostle St Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland, an episode of which Blessed John Paul spoke many years ago when he first came here on a visit to Edinburgh.

Jesus had been teaching a crowd of five thousand people about the kingdom of God. They had listened carefully all day, and as evening approached he did not want to send them away hungry, so he told his disciples to give them something to eat. He said this really to test them, because he knew exactly what he was going to do. One of his disciples – it was Andrew – said: “There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fishes; but what is that between so many?” Jesus took the loaves, blessed them, and gave them out to all who were sitting waiting; he then did the same with the fish, giving out as much as was wanted. Later the disciples collected twelve baskets of the fragments that were left over (cf Jn 6: 1-4).

Now the point I wish to make is this: Saint Andrew gave Jesus all that there was available, and Jesus miraculously fed those five thousand people and still had something left over. It is exactly the same with your lives. Left alone to face the difficult challenges of life today, you feel conscious of your own inadequacy and afraid of what the future may hold for you. But what I say to you is this: place your lives in the hands of Jesus. He will accept you, and bless you, and he will make such use of your lives as will be beyond your greatest expectations! In other words surrender yourselves, like so many loaves and fishes, into the all-powerful sustaining hands of God and you will find yourselves transformed with “newness of life” (Rom 6:4), with fullness of life (cf Jn 1:6). “Unload your burden on the Lord, and he will support you” (Ps. 55:22).¹

¹ Pope John Paul II, Talk at Edinburgh, 31 May, 1982. See *The Pope Teaches: The Pope in Britain* (London 1982) p.189.

In order for our work as priests to flourish there are three things we need more than any other aids or gifts in this life, more than any other talents or graces, and they are the virtues of faith, hope, and love. All three of these great virtues we receive directly from Christ Jesus. He is our strength in faith, our strength in hope, and our strength in love. When, in times of trial, we find, not only our day-to-day work, but also our inmost selves being somehow strengthened and encouraged by these gifts, by these three wondrous, necessary virtues, then with confidence we can say that Christ is indeed risen and alive at the centre of our lives. But how does this happen in practice? And what can we say about the priesthood in this context? The question is obviously impossible to answer in one short talk. Let it suffice, then, if I explore instead just a few of the ways in which, as priests, we are given the courage and confidence to continue our day-to-day work in ministry, knowing that Christ is at the centre of all we try to do: Christ, our strength in faith, our strength in hope, our strength in love.

1. Christ: Our Strength in Faith

One of the most moving and most powerful statements St Paul made to his companion, Timothy, occurs in the last letter he wrote to his friend from Rome. Timothy had clearly been going through a time of great affliction, and Paul writes to encourage him so that, in spite of all the immediate pressures and problems Timothy is facing, he would be able to keep alive the flame of his original enthusiasm for the task of the apostolate and for the preaching of the Good News. Paul writes:

I am reminding you now to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you. God's gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, and love, and self-control. So you are never to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord, or ashamed of me for being his prisoner; but with me, bear the hardships for the sake of the Good News; relying on the power of God who has saved us and called us to be holy – not because of anything we ourselves have done but for his own purpose and by his own grace. This grace had already been granted to us in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 1: 6-9).

When Paul speaks here about the actual moment he laid his hands on Timothy, it's impossible for us, as priests, not to be reminded at once of the moment of our own ordination to the priesthood. How bright at that moment was the flame of our youthful dedication! How confident our faith in Christ and in his Church! But, as the years pass, the inevitable challenges and pressures of life in ministry can take their toll, as Paul's companion, Timothy, clearly discovered. The flame of our early enthusiasm can begin to weaken or even indeed appear to be extinguished. Hard knocks and the knowledge at times of failure in priestly ministry – the failure of others and our own failure – can lead to a sense of hopelessness and despondency. And that's why Paul writes to Timothy: "I am reminding you now to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you. God's gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, and love, and self-control."

One of the ways our faith is strengthened is, of course, through memory. And that's why, every so often, we need to take time to recover the wonderful memory of the placing of Christ's hands on our head at ordination. What Christ said to us then – and said silently through the solemn imposition of the hands of the bishop – he still says to us now at this moment: "Be aware," he says,

“of the silent, loving pressure of my hands on your head. I have called you to share in my priesthood. Not for a moment do I regret this choice. You are, in a sense, my very flesh as priests in the world: my hands to raise in blessing and absolve from sin, my lips to speak words of encouragement and healing, my eyes to see with great clarity the needs of the poor and afflicted, my heart to seek out and befriend those most in need of mercy.”

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In the *Dialogue* of St Catherine of Siena an enormous compliment is paid to those priests who struggle hard to stay faithful to their calling. Such men, God the Father declares to Catherine, are “stewards of the light”.² “They have,” he says, “taken on the qualities of myself, the true Sun. By love they have been made one thing with me and I with them.”³ And he says further:

The sun warms and enlightens, and with its heat makes the earth bring forth fruit. So also these gentle ministers of mine, whom I chose and anointed and sent into the mystical body of holy Church to be stewards of me, the Sun, that is, of the body and blood of my only-begotten Son along with the other sacraments that draw life from this blood. They administer it both actually and spiritually by giving off within the mystical body of holy Church the brightness of supernatural learning, the colour of a holy and honourable life in following the teaching of my Truth, and the warmth of blazing charity. Thus with their warmth they cause barren souls to bring forth fruit and enlighten them with the brightness of learning.⁴

By far the greatest compliment the Father pays to ministerial priests in the *Dialogue* is when, on occasion, he refers to them as “my Christs.” “They are my anointed ones,” he says, “and I call them my Christs because I have appointed them to be my ministers ... No angel has this dignity, but I have given it to those men whom I have chosen to be my ministers.”⁵ Not all priests, sad to say, try their best to live up to this high ideal. Catherine of Siena, distressed, on one occasion, by hearing of the disturbing and unhappy behaviour of a certain priest called Pietro, wrote to him as follows:

Consider your dignity, since God has in mercy given you the great distinction of having to dispense the fire of divine charity, the body and blood of Christ crucified. Just think! Not even the angels have such dignity! See how God has put his word into the vessel of your soul. You know very well that when you speak in the person of Christ, you have the authority to consecrate that wonderful sacrament. So you must carry this word with an immense fire of love, with

² St Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, n.119, trans., S. Noffke (New York) p.221.

³ *Ibid.*, p.222.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, n.113, p.212.

spiritual and bodily purity, and with a peaceable heart, dispelling all hatred and animosity from your soul.⁶

Hearing a text like this, we are made aware at once of the profound mystery of the priesthood, and of the mystery in particular of our own individual calling. For it has to be said that there is not even one among us here, this afternoon, who is worthy by himself of such a grace, such a privilege. By giving us the dignity of sharing in the ministry of the Gospel, and in the grace and blessing of his divine presence in the sacraments, Christ has made it clear – amazing thought – that we are his friends, his beloved. Yes, we are also, of course, *servants* of the Word, and – yes – our call is to keep faith with the revelation heard from the beginning, and to proclaim and serve a truth that is not our own. And yes we are asked, whatever job or task we are given in the vineyard of the Lord, to have the humility to decrease so that he may increase.

But, that said, being ordained as ministerial priests in the Church means not only being sent out into the world to proclaim the Good News as willing servants. It means also, as Mark's Gospel makes abundantly clear, being called by Christ simply "to be *with him*" (Mk 3:14). And that means friendship, and it means intimacy. Not simply, therefore, being prepared to do the work of the Lord, but being prepared also to make space every day in our lives for *the Lord of the work*. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in a talk he gave in May 2005 to the clergy of Rome, had this to say on the subject: "Spending time in God's presence in prayer is a real pastoral priority; it is not an addition to pastoral work: being before the Lord is a pastoral priority and in the final analysis, the most important."⁷ And, speaking on the same theme, on another occasion, he remarked:

Whenever priests, because of their many duties, allot less and less time to being with the Lord, they eventually lose, for all their often heroic activity, the inner strength that sustains them. Their activity ends up as an empty activism. To be with Christ – how does that come about? Well, the first and most important thing for the priest is his daily Mass, always celebrated with deep interior participation. If we celebrate Mass truly as men of prayer, if we unite our words and our activities to the Word that precedes us and let them be shaped by the Eucharistic celebration, if in Communion we let ourselves truly be embraced by him and receive him – then we are being with him.⁸

The Curé d'Ars, St John-Mary Vianney, speaking on one occasion to his parishioners regarding the need for believers not simply to obey Christ as servants, but to respond to the extraordinary call to have friendship with him, exclaimed: "Come to communion, my brothers and

⁶ St Catherine of Siena, Letter to Pietro, Priest of Semignano, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, vol 1, trans., S. Noffke (Tempe, Arizona 2000) p.276.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Clergy of Rome, 31 May, 2005. See *Benedict XVI: Priests of Jesus Christ: Reflections on the Priesthood* (Oxford 2009) p.71.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily given at Basilica of St Anne, Altötting, 11 September, 2006. See *Benedict XVI: Priests of Jesus Christ: Reflections on the Priesthood*, p.27.

sisters, come to Jesus. Come to live from him in order to live with him.”⁹ “Of course you are not worthy of him, but *you need him*.”¹⁰

As ministerial priests, one of the great ways of developing an intimacy or friendship with Christ is the daily practice of reading the breviary, of celebrating, that is, as faithfully as we can the Liturgy of the Hours. This practice, the Church assures us, will have the effect of strengthening and deepening our faith, giving us, in time, *a personal and living experience of the mystery*. That last phrase comes from a statement made by Blessed John Paul II in his book, *Gift and Mystery*. He wrote: “The minister of the Word must possess and pass on that knowledge of God which is not a mere deposit of doctrinal truths, but a personal and living experience of the Mystery.”¹¹

Why it is the case that reading the breviary can, in time, initiate us into a living knowledge of Christ? It is because almost all the prayers we are asked to pray in the “Hours” are psalms. And these psalms were, of course, the very prayers Christ himself said as a young boy and as an adult. To read the psalms, therefore, as a priest, is much more than a mere external obligation. It is a practice, in fact, which gives us access to the mind of Christ at prayer, access even to his innermost heart. As we read the psalms, day after day, they teach us how “to put on Christ”, how to conform our lives to his life, and how in some way even to imitate his affections, his thoughts, his intentions.

Christ, in his humanity, experienced many of the same feelings as the psalmist, the same fears and desires, and the same experiences of joy in giving thanks and praise, and the same sense of abandonment and loneliness. As we ourselves, as priests, recite the psalms, and repeat the very prayers which Christ prayed all through his life, they help to initiate us into the knowledge that, no matter how many or how difficult the trials we have to face in this world, we are never ultimately alone, we are never without Christ, for Christ is alive within us, and alive even in the very words which we pray and repeat every day by simply reading the breviary.

And there is one other thing worth noting here. When we keep faith with the “Hours”, we are praying not only *for* the people of God, but *with* the people of God. The prayer of the Church is not something we initiate ourselves. No, it is a prayer which has begun long before we ever thought of praying. It is the on-going prayer of God’s people, a prayer which we are simply privileged to join. Others in the Church, and many no doubt of the hidden but great saints alive today, have been interceding for us, hour after hour, day after day, without our even knowing it. And that means, of course, that when we begin to say this prayer, we can take a deep breath, as it were, and relax, knowing that our own small efforts at praise and petition are being supported by a great crowd of witnesses. This thought, this reality, is of course no small support and encouragement in our life of faith.

⁹ St John-Mary Vianney, “Le Sacerdoce, c’est l’amour du coeur de Jésus,” in *Le curé d’Ars, Sa pensée – Son coeur*. Présentées par l’Abbé Bernard Nodet, éd. Xavier Mappua, *Foi Vivante*, 1966, p.114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.115.

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the 50th Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (Nairobi 1996) p.109.

2. Christ: Our Strength in Hope

In spite of the manifest joy we experience in the priestly life, and the enormous gratitude we feel for our vocation, it's impossible not to be aware, in these days, of certain new pressures and challenges which, at least for a time, can have the effect of discouraging us, and of shaking our confidence. But these very pressures, as you know well, can be used by God to achieve two things of vital importance for us: they make us more humble as men, and they bring us closer to Christ and to the people.

We have, as ministerial priests, been especially chosen from among the people, it's true, and have been given a privileged share in the ministry of Christ. But we remain poor servants all the same. If there are new circumstances, new pressures, which remind us of this fact, that's no harm, in fact it's a blessing. God knows we struggle in the life of faith like everyone else - and our people in the parishes, and elsewhere, know this very well. But our people also have another kind of knowledge, and it's a marvellous knowledge, a saving knowledge. They know that as ministerial priests we carry, by God's grace, a treasure that is greater, much greater than ourselves. And that's why they look to us, or rather look to Christ the Priest within us, for an encouragement they can find nowhere else. And the name of that encouragement is hope.

Pope Paul VI, in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, defines Christian hope as "hope for something that is not seen, and that *one would not dare imagine*."¹² That last phrase holds the key. For what we are talking about here is not some kind of educated or half-educated optimism. Christian hope does not consult the polls every day. It does not obsessively read the editorials. Grounded in a prayerful experience of God's power to save, it is a grace of vision extravagant in its range and scope; it is a gift striking in its imaginative daring. Wise, therefore, and worth remembering, are the words we read in Eric Hoffer's book, *The True Believer*: "Those who would transform a nation or the world cannot do so by breeding and captaining discontent or by demonstrating the reasonableness and desirability of the intended changes or by coercing people into a new way of life. They must know how to kindle and fan an extravagant hope."¹³

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One of the greatest joys of the priesthood is becoming aware of the many ways in which Christ, by using our gifts and talents, and by transforming our human weakness into strength, can bring hope and encouragement to his people. But it is, as you know, not always easy, in practice, to keep hope alive within *our own hearts*. The increasing pressure of work in the parish, the disturbing shortage of vocations to the priesthood, or the breaking news of some new scandal within the Church, all these things can make us anxious and disheartened. And it's then that we need more than ever, of course, to make time for prayer and meditation. But, being human, it can happen that we allow the everyday pressures of life, and the demands made on us by the people, to undermine even our best intentions in this regard. It's easy to identify, therefore, with the following statement from St Augustine. Although made many centuries ago, his words have a decidedly contemporary ring. Augustine would have loved to spend more time at prayer. But, being a good pastor, he was

¹² Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975) n.21.

¹³ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York 1951) p.168.

also determined to give as much time as possible to his people. And so he writes: “Now – day after day, hour after hour – I must stand at the door where the bell is always ringing, I must comfort the afflicted, help the poor, reprimand those who are quarrelsome, create peace and so forth.”¹⁴

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In the spiritual tradition we are encouraged by the saints to look to Sacred Scripture to find texts which, in some way, will help define the nature of our own particular mission and vocation. Whether we are priests working in a parish, or priests belonging to one of the great religious Orders or institutes, innumerable texts from the New Testament will no doubt suggest themselves. But, in the Gospel of John, there is one particular text which evokes, in an unusually striking way, something of the distinctive character and mission of the busy parish priest and of his life of prayer. I am thinking of Chapter 12 in John’s Gospel, verses 20 to 33.

In this text St John allows us to overhear Jesus praying to his Father. The prayer, in fact, ends with the words, “Father, glorify your name”, a phrase familiar to us from other reported prayers of Jesus. But there is something unusual, all the same, about the prayer. It is not uttered in solitude, alone with his Father, in preparation for some major decision; nor is it said in the remote solitude of a high mountain; nor at the Last Supper with a few chosen friends; nor in the solitude of the Garden of Gethsemane. No – while Jesus is praying, he is surrounded by all kinds of different people. The text speaks, first of all, of a number of Greeks who had arrived in time for the Feast, and who had expressed the desire “to see Jesus”. Then Philip and Andrew are mentioned. And, finally, we hear of a crowd of bystanders. What is impressive here is that, although Jesus finds himself surrounded by all kinds of noise and commotion, and by different individuals seeking his attention, he is still able to find time to pray. And that, of course, is what is encouraging to witness in the lives of many hard-working parish priests today. Their life of prayer does not take place in the quiet solitude of a monastery, but instead at the pulsing heart of a busy parish with all its pressures and demands. A life of dedicated prayer, in other words, but one achieved against the odds, and in the midst of the world.

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The prayer spoken by Jesus to his Father is brief but unforgettable. He says: “Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Just before he pronounced this prayer, while the crowd were listening, Jesus did not hesitate to deliver a number of robust and challenging statements. Here is one, for example: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” A hard saying indeed! The words themselves: confident, hard-edged, and authoritative. But, when Jesus starts to pray, moments later, we have the impression that, all of a sudden, he has been struck by the force and meaning of his own words. It is a rare moment in a Johannine text: this sudden, hurt inwardness, this dawning realization, on the part of Jesus, of the sacrifice that is being asked of him: “Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Save me from this hour?”

¹⁴ St Augustine of Hippo, cited by Pope Benedict XVI in Address to Clergy of Rome, Thursday 22 February 2007. See *Priests of Jesus Christ*, p.111.

Most of the “hours” of a priest’s life are not, I would say, characterised by great anxiety or by a haunting fear of the future. On the contrary. But, sooner or later, for all of us, there arrives that “hour” of challenge of which Jesus speaks. And, in that hour, we come to realize, more clearly than ever before, that it is not enough to have the public persona of a priest, not enough to live our lives on the surface, as it were. The things we have been preaching for years to the people now begin to sound in our own hearts. The Word of God, which cuts like a double-edged sword, is asking us – we begin to realize – to measure up to our own words, to our own speaking.

None of this, of course, is easy. The challenge is one that we would much rather avoid. But what gives us enormous hope is that, when we find ourselves as priests in a place of hurt or of great vulnerability or of embarrassment, and we find the phrase “Now my heart is troubled” coming to our own lips, we can be sure that Christ the High Priest is living his life within us, living, re-living his Passion, and that the grace of his cross will undoubtedly triumph.

The most human thing in the world is to want to avoid the cross, and to want to say to God “Save me from this hour”. But if, in those moments of great fear and anxiety, we fall back on his grace, and on his strength as God, we will find courage to say, “No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

3. Christ: Our Strength in Love

Words, sincere words, coming straight from the heart have great authority. But what most impresses the men and women of the present generation are *not* words, no matter how eloquent or sincere they may sound, *not* lengthy talks, no matter how apparently profound, but rather witness. And the witness our contemporaries find most immediately impressive, and most authentic, is that of manifest concern for the poor in our society, for the weak and underprivileged, and for those in the greatest suffering. “The priest,” we read in Vatican II’s document on the priesthood, “although he has obligations towards all men and women, has the poor and the lowly entrusted to him in a special way.”¹⁵

Among the many tasks we find ourselves undertaking as priests, the one task which will prove most immediately effective in encouraging our contemporaries to believe in the Good News, is the love and care we show for the poor, a love quickened and inspired by the presence of our Risen Brother and Lord in the Eucharist, and in the other sacraments of the Church. Love, then – God’s love for us in Christ and our love for one another – will, in the end, offer the most compelling testimony to the truth and beauty of the Gospel.

Every priest, as you know, is called to be an icon of Christ the Servant. That’s our vocation, that’s the vision. But every priest is also called – in some measure at least – to be an icon of Christ the *suffering* Servant. Not because suffering in itself is holy – it is not – but because through the hurts and sorrows of life, we are drawn closer to Christ and closer also to all those who are in any kind of suffering or distress. The world around us today is in a state of anguish and bewilderment.

¹⁵ “Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests,” ch. 2, n.6, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, trans., J. Gallagher (London 1967) pp.544-45.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that as priests we find ourselves called by Christ to have some share in these hurts and humiliations, these sufferings?

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Mother Teresa, wrote on one occasion to a friend who was clearly bewildered because of certain tragic events happening within the Church at that time. It occurs to me that her words might almost have been written to aid our own reflections here this afternoon:

Do not ... allow the present things to disturb you ... It hurts you – because it is hurting [Christ] ... it is only natural that Jesus in you suffers His passion all anew. Let us share with Him His pain. Let us feel what He felt. What deep pain there must be in His heart and yet the Church, His Bride and our Mother, will come out of all these purifications – more true – more beautiful – more living – more loving. It was necessary for her to share to the full the Passion of Christ when her children throughout the world are being crucified – through war, earthquake, floods, disease and hunger ... Christ wants his Bride to feel in her soul all these terrible disasters, and that is why all this [suffering].¹⁶

About a month ago in Rome, on the eve of Pentecost, Pope Francis was asked, in front of an enormous crowd, what he meant by the phrase “a poor Church for the poor”. He replied:

Poverty, for us Christians, is not a sociological or philosophical or cultural category. No. It is a theological category. I would say, perhaps, the first category, because God, the Son of God, humbled himself, became poor to walk along the road with us.¹⁷

What we meet, therefore, when we encounter the poor is, according to the sharp and bright vision of Pope Francis, “the flesh of Christ” – nothing less. When people in great need, people living in conditions of real poverty, trust us enough, as priests, to share their distress and their worries, when they welcome us as friends into their homes, into their sick rooms, and into their innermost hearts, it is Christ who is welcoming us, Christ who is trusting us, Christ who is calling us friends. And this trust, bestowed on us by Christ, calls for enormous responsibility and also for great generosity on our part. What Christ is asking of us, through the voice of his people in need, is much more than a mere professional help. He is asking us to give something of our very selves. In the end, as you know well, from your own experience, love calls for sacrifice. And that undeserved blessing we call friendship with Christ, or intimacy, makes its quiet but unmistakable demand.

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Poverty can assume, as you know, many different forms. And one of the most distressing manifestations of poverty in our society today is lack of knowledge of God. As priests, our most immediate and most important task is to respond to that particular kind of distressing need or

¹⁶ Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Unpublished letter sent to Sister Mary of the Holy Trinity, 3 November 1968.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, Pentecost Vigil with Ecclesial Communities, 18 May 2013.

hunger. In the words of Vatican II's document on the priesthood, our "primary duty" is nothing other than "the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all."¹⁸

Considerable numbers in our society today still hunger and thirst for the basic needs of life. There is, for example, an urgent hunger for justice in many parts of the world. But there is also another kind of hunger experienced by our contemporaries, and one all too often overlooked or misunderstood. It is hunger for what we might call the bread of meaning, hunger for sustenance to feed the soul. Without it men and women will never find true fulfilment in this life or find lasting happiness. Human beings need vision to survive. And that's why, if they are deprived of the bread of vision, they will quite literally begin to starve interiorly; they will begin to perish.

In this context, it's not difficult to appreciate the absolute importance of the Gospel vision we have inherited, a vision which it is our task and privilege as priests to continue to proclaim. Naturally, we must never forget those who are *physically* starving in this world, and do everything we can to alleviate their hunger. But, as priests, our most fundamental task is to try to answer the needs of the human spirit. And we do that, best of all, by preaching the Gospel, offering those men and women among our contemporaries, whose lives are manifestly starved of purpose and meaning, the alms of truth.

In an age as bewildering as our own, many of our contemporaries, and some even among the men and women of our own parishes who, up to a short time ago, considered themselves faithful Catholics, are now not always sure what to believe, or what to trust. Fortunately, most believers still hold to their convictions, but they are beginning to lose confidence, beginning even to wonder if there can be any certainty about truth anymore. In this context the best way you can serve your people, as priests, I would suggest, is by standing calmly and firmly on the rock of the Church's faith. I say this because, of course, the great and saving truths contained in the Creed – every single one of them – are as profound, and as illumined, and as credible as ever.

What, at core, the Creed contains is, as you know, a revelation about the true nature of God. From beginning to end, it speaks of God's loving desire in Christ to liberate us, once and for all, from the burden of guilt and sin, and it speaks also about the true nature of the Church, and why it makes sense – why it is a matter of understandable pride and joy – for Catholics, even today, and in the face of widely reported scandals, to stand up and recite the Creed on Sunday, declaring not only "I believe in God" but "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church".

The true Church of God is a Church of both saints and sinners. The fact that there are so many great saints in the Church, so many remarkable men and women in every age – among them, of course, many priests – is no small blessing, and a cause of enormous encouragement. But the sinners in the Church, in our own days, tend to get most of the attention. And this occurs, needless to say, in the few relatively isolated cases of major scandal. The public media, but not only the media, we ourselves can become so fixed on the negative detail, we risk ignoring completely the fuller picture, the greater truth. How relevant, therefore, for our own immediate situation is the

¹⁸ "Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests," ch.2, n.4, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, trans., J. Gallagher (London 1967) pp.538-39.

following wise saying: “A single tree falling in the forest creates more noise and rumour than an entire forest as it grows up in silence.”

“Yes,” as one commentator has observed, taking up this image, “the Church is, sad to say, represented on occasion by those of its members who are seen to fall dramatically, and whose misdeeds, as a result, receive enormous attention. But the Church is also that ‘entire forest’ of good men and women, their lives, their deeds unsung and, for the most part, unnoticed by the wider world, countless hundreds and thousands of them, flourishing with their own grace, their own courage: an entire forest growing up in silence.”¹⁹

It is not by accident that what drew the great Scottish poet, George Mackay Brown, to become a Roman Catholic was the impressive devotion of the ordinary men and women he witnessed at Mass here in Scotland, the manifest strength of their faith in Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Writing, on one occasion, concerning the people he saw making their way up to the altar to receive Communion, he remarked: “old blind men and beautiful young girls, youths in Air Force uniform and schoolgirls ... I have never witnessed anything like it in any other Church ... The Catholics have a beautiful faith, and they enter into it with all their hearts and souls.”²⁰ And writing, in another place, he has this to say:

That such an institution as the Church of Rome – with all its human faults – had lasted for nearly two thousand years, while parties and factions and kingdoms had had their day and withered, seemed to me to be utterly wonderful. Some mysterious power seemed to be preserving it against the assaults and erosions of time.²¹

Often, through the witness of God’s people, we find ourselves as priests being supported in faith and hope and love. And the people also look to us, of course, for a no less strong and encouraging witness; even, as I imagine, they looked in the past to the good priests of Scotland over hundreds of years. Christ, on the day of our priestly ordination, placed his two hands on our heads, and with that same gesture anointed our forerunners in the Catholic priesthood, whether here in Scotland or elsewhere. Today let us remember that moment of election, and ask Christ to renew in us the grace of his priesthood, and to give us, especially in these days of enormous challenge, the strength of faith and hope and love to continue our mission. May God bless you all!

¹⁹ See Paul Murray, O.P., “Why Remain in the Church Today?” in *Doctrine and Life*, vol 56, no.6, July/August 2006, p.38.

²⁰ Statement by George Mackay Brown, cited in *George Mackay Brown: The Life* by Maggie Fergusson (London 2006) pp.88-9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.39.