



Homily - Commissioning Mass for Agencies

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Today's first reading comes to us from the First Letter of Saint Paul to Timothy. I realise it is not very logical but I have always thought that as I bear the same name I should take special notice of whatever St Paul says to Timothy as if it were also, in some way, addressed to me. This can sometimes make for uncomfortable reading or listening because St Paul can be very direct. This of course is part of his great gift to the Church – he often spells out in very clear detail what the Christian message really calls us to – but it can present us with some daunting challenges.

This is certainly the case in today's reading. Paul makes very clear that there are certain attitudes and approaches to life which will inevitably lead to the destruction of a Christian community if people continue to indulge in them. In the context of today's Mass we could also say that such attitudes carry within them the seeds of destruction for a Catholic Agency. Such an institution might continue to function but it will not be, in reality, a Catholic agency, no matter what name it bears.

When we ask what makes an institution "Catholic" – when we begin to reflect in other words on the idea of Catholic Identity - we often focus on what is unique to us; on what it is that makes our agency or organisation distinctive and different from other agencies who perhaps do the same kind of work. This is important and essential. It is also somewhat complex. Catholic identity is really born of a particular vision of what makes a life truly, deeply and fully human. All our moral teachings for example - which then can become pointers to the things without which a place cannot be truly Catholic - flow from this. A Catholic hospital, for example, will not provide or promote IVF procedures, a Catholic social welfare agency will not refer pregnant women to an abortion provider, and a Catholic aged care facility will not advocate for euthanasia. From a different perspective a Catholic school will not teach that there is more than one God, or that Jesus was simply a very good man and nothing more, or that what we receive in the Eucharist is mere bread and wine



However if we limit the idea of Catholic identity to what the Church will not do or cannot condone we are certainly presenting a dimension of our Catholic identity but nothing like the full picture. Even worse we are defining what it means to be Catholic only in negative terms whereas Jesus talks about the fullness of life – a very positive thing.

In each of the cases I have mentioned above the list of things we won't do, or can't condone, is really an expression of what we will do, and do not simply condone but actively support. As Catholic agencies we will celebrate the unique and fundamental dignity of every human person, irrespective of how others might judge their usefulness or the so-called quality of their life. We will rejoice in, and defend, the preciousness and beauty of human life in all its stages and in all its manifestations. We will continue to proclaim that God is real, that God does love each person equally, and that God seeks to be a vital and life-giving source of strength and joy in every person's life. We will be a people, and organizations, who to quote a famous Anglican spiritual writer, Evelyn Underhill, recognise that God's existence is the single most important fact in any human life. Because of this we are convinced that to exclude God, or somehow apologize for or be embarrassed about any reference to God, is to severely limit the experience of what life is all about.

We might think of it this way: a truly Catholic institution or agency will - each one in its own unique way – be a place where the Catholic ethos, the Catholic world view, the Catholic way of putting life together and making sense of life, is the foundation not just of its mission statement or its formal mandate or its constitution but, even more importantly, of its day to day operations.

Commitment to the moral teachings of the Church is essential for fidelity to our vocation to be a part of the Church. But so is our commitment to the kinds of values which are alluded to, albeit in a negative way, in today's first reading. A Catholic institution or agency will be a place where everyone knows that, at least as an ideal, and hopefully more and more as a reality, jealousy is foreign, contention is unacceptable, abuse and mistrust are rejected, and foolish and dangerous ambition are banished. So too will be a holding of grudges and a refusal to forgive. Positively a Catholic institution will be a place where we rejoice in the success of our colleagues, where we seek to resolve differences in a spirit of mutual respect and a firm belief in the good will of each other, where people are never abused, and where selfish ambition always gives way to the best interests of the whole community.

Pope John Paul II used to express this by saying that the Church, and I would add therefore all agencies in the Church, should be a home and school of communion. In all the difficulties, disagreements, challenges and misunderstandings that can so easily arise when any group of people work closely together, a Catholic Agency must be a place where, to quote Jesus himself, we seek to love one another as he has loved us. Most work places would not hold out love as the ideal for workplace relations. A Catholic workplace does.



This then is what a truly Catholic institution will look like. This is what all who work in such an institution will hopefully be both encountering, and contributing to, each day. This is the face we should be presenting to the world.

As we prepare to enter the Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis we might sum all this up by referring to the Pope's opening words in his letter announcing this special year: Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. As people who work in one of our archdiocesan agencies we all have our part to play in ensuring that those who work with us and those who engage with us, in whatever role we play in the archdiocese, are immersed in a culture which is a living experience of Jesus, the face of the mercy and love of God.