

parish will be divided into small, manageable units each of which will have the possibility of forming itself into a community of disciples. In this way, the parish will be like a community of communities.

"Serving Humanity"

There is, however, a very important consideration to bear in mind when we think of Christian community. The community which Jesus called together was a community of service. No community can call itself Christian if it is not a community of service, reaching out as Jesus did to broken and suffering humanity all around us.



We must remember that Jesus formed a community of disciples around him to continue his mission in the world:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
He has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives
and new sight to the blind;
to free the oppressed
and announce the Lord's year of mercy". (Luke
4:18-19)*

Jesus himself came not to be served but to serve (Mt 5: 14). It is this attitude of self-giving, of washing one another's feet (Jn 13: 1-5), that we are called to follow, both in our own life as a community and in the service which we give to those around us. Jesus teaches us that those who exercise leadership roles in the Christian community are there to serve the community, and not to lord it over others.

The humanity which we are called to serve includes all people. The Church is not just there to serve its own members and its motivation in serving is not simply to get people to join it. Rather it serves in order to build up human unity, to improve the quality of human life, to enable people to love

and be loved, and to develop in a way that is a true reflection of their own dignity as children of God.

The humanity which we are called to serve in South Africa is broken and divided. In a society that is torn apart by violence, hatred and suspicion the Church is called to demonstrate, through its own life and through its service to others, that human community is possible. This community is possible precisely because it is based on Jesus Christ who came among us, not to lord it over us, but to share himself, and the love of his Father, with us.

A call to all of us...

This vision of the Church which our bishops have presented to us is certainly challenging. No longer can we be content with being "provided for" by foreign missionaries, or even by our own parish priest! No longer can we see the missionary work of the Church, or even its standing for justice, as going on "out there". The mission of the Church, and its constant search for justice, is something that must continue to revitalise our own lives, the lives of our parishes, and the society around about us.



To carry out this mission we need to be firmly rooted in God. We need to develop our own lives of prayer and continue to grow and develop in the knowledge of our faith. The mission of the Church cannot just be left to the clergy or even the religious to carry out. All Christians are called to work together in unity to enable our Church to be God's presence to those in need.

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The Monastery, Bergvliet Rd, Bergvliet, 7945

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This is our Church

The pastoral vision of
the Catholic Church
in South Africa



A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication



Standing for justice

While this missionary expansion was taking shape, so was the political and social history of the sub-continent. Over several decades many wars were fought. The Boer War, a bitter war which lasted three years, resulted in the unification of the British colonies and Boer Republics into one country which became known as the Union of South Africa. However, this 'union' completely overlooked the majority of the population. Black people were excluded from the political process. This gave rise to the system that would eventually be known as apartheid.

The changing context called for a new response on the part of the Church. As more and more apartheid laws were introduced in the 1950s the Church leadership became increasingly concerned. Eventually the bishops realised that they could not remain silent in the face of injustice and declared apartheid to be "intrinsicly evil".

In the years that followed a new image of the Church began to emerge. In this image the Church was seen as a prophet speaking on behalf of the voiceless, denouncing injustice and standing for the truth. Although the Church was often criticised for meddling in politics, it stood firmly to its principles which were based on the gospel.

The Pastoral Plan

The brief history of the Catholic Church in South Africa which we have just outlined brings us to the present. In today's changing context we need to ask the underlying question: what image can best reflect the type of Church God is calling us to be today?

This is the sort of question the bishops asked in a wide-ranging consultation more than ten years ago. Local and national discussions took place. And the answer that kept coming up was: we want to be a Church where people experience community, where they feel a sense of belonging, and where

they can share their faith with one another. In other words, people wanted a Church that would remain faithful to Jesus' commandment of loving one another and serving the needs of the broken society around us.

Out of all this the bishops worked towards and finally launched a pastoral plan for the entire Church in South Africa. The image of the Church reflected in our pastoral plan is contained very concisely in the catch-phrase **community serving humanity**. This is how we envisage the Church today, and this is the vision of the Church we want to hand on to the next generation. But where does this image come from? Let us go back to our bibles.

"Community"



The first thing that Jesus did when he set out on his mission of proclaiming good news to the poor was to gather around him a group of disciples whom he called by name. We can imagine him walking along the beach and entering into a conversation with Peter the fisherman; or strolling past Matthew as he collected the taxes; and inviting them: "Come, follow me". With the call of the Twelve, we have the small, humble beginnings of what was to become a community of disciples, each of whom follows Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles, which is the earliest account of the Church, mentions that the Twelve called "a meeting of the disciples". The main criterion of membership in Church was quite simply: discipleship, following Jesus. It is in the Church that we are able to become genuine disciples of Jesus. Members of the Church rely on each other, they support each other and they encourage each other to grow and persevere in discipleship.

This is the image of the Church which is being presented by our pastoral plan today. But we all know that it is practically impossible to experience community in a parish made up of 1000 families. That is why the pastoral plan has adopted the Small Christian Community model. This means that a



Use your Imagination

Human beings are blessed with the wonderful gift of imagination. How often our imagination comes into play when we are listening to a story or when someone is telling a joke. And when it comes to jokes we don't catch straight away, one often hears the frustrated plea of the joke-teller: "Use your imagination!" We also know the expression: "Let your imagination run wild!" Now and again we catch ourselves doing just that in the form of day-dreaming. Imagination is an essential part of being human.

The gift of imagination is something we can bring into our life of faith. We can use it to imagine what sort of person Jesus must have been. From what we read about the apostles, we can imagine their different personalities such as Peter's recklessness and John's gentleness. We can imagine what the early Christians must have suffered during the time of persecution and martyrdom. Indeed, our powers of imagination are vital as we try to paint a picture of persons and events in the past from various records and documents that have been passed down to us.

Our imagination is not limited to the past. We can also imagine what things will be like in the future. The area of technology especially fascinates us. We wonder what cars, computers and space travel will be like in the future. Occasionally we start dreaming about ourselves twenty years from now.

Likewise, in our faith, we can ask imaginative questions about what the Church will be like in the future. One way of putting it would be like this: how do I think of the Church at the present moment... how do I imagine the Church to be in fifty years time?

Imagining the Church

The various images we have of the Church can be very helpful when we try to understand and ex-

plore the mystery that it is. It might be a good idea at this point to stop reading now. Put this pamphlet aside, and ask yourself what different images you have of the Church? How did you see it or imagine it when you were a child? When you think of the Church today, what picture comes to mind?

Pause to reflect. Don't cheat and read any further!

Biblical images of the Church

If we turn to the bible, we find a record of how people through the ages have imagined the Church. Of course, we must not suppose that what we find in the bible is purely human thinking. We believe that the scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit. If that is true, then what we read about the Church in scripture provides us with a glimpse of God's dream of what the Church should be. Let us now examine some scriptural images used to describe the Church.

The People of God

One of the most common biblical images for the Church is "People of God". It is an image which is rooted in the Old Testament, especially in the story of Moses and the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. You may remember how God led the Israelites across the Sea of Reeds and into the desert and on to the Promised Land. During that long journey, God revealed himself in a very profound way to the travellers, through his servant Moses. He made a special agreement with them which became known as a covenant. "*You shall be my people, and I will be your God*". It is the covenant that bound together such an unlikely group of former slaves to make them the "People of God".

Saint Peter develops this theme in his first letter when he describes the early Church. He tells them:

"You are a chosen race, a community of priest-kings, a consecrated nation, a people God



has made his own to proclaim his wonders... At one stage you were no people, but now you are God's people..." (1 Pet 2:9-10)

In our own recent history, the Second Vatican Council emphasised this understanding of the Church. In its document on the Church the Council showed the link between the People of God in the Old Testament and the Church today.

"As Israel which wandered in the desert was already called the Church of God, so too, the new Israel, which advances in this present era in search of a future and permanent city, is already called the Church of Christ".

All this is part of God's plan for the salvation of the human race. The Vatican Council states:

"God has willed to make people holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people...his own people".

From the biblical evidence and from our tradition, therefore, we are able to imagine the Church as a pilgrim people on its way to the real promised land, the Kingdom of God.

The Body of Christ

Another very common biblical image for the Church is "The Body of Christ". This is a theme which Saint Paul in particular develops in his letters when he writes to Christians that Christ is the head of the Body and that they are the members. He puts it clearly to the Colossians: "*he is the head of his body, the Church*" (Col 1:18). Saint Paul also sees the Eucharist as the greatest expression of the truth that we are the Body of Christ. Although we are many, because we share one loaf, we form one body. When writing about the gifts of the Spirit, Saint Paul comes back to the idea of the body.

"As the body is one, having many members, and all the members, while being many, form one body, so it is with Christ. All of us... have been baptised in one Spirit to form one body, and all of us have been given to drink from the one Spirit". (1 Cor 12: 12-13)



Christian theology has used this image through the ages to help it understand the Church as the extension on earth of the risen and glorious body of Christ. At times this meant that the Church lost sight of its own weaknesses and limitations because it confused its own external structures with the presence of Christ and the Kingdom of God. However, despite that, the image of the Church as the Body of Christ helps us to understand our dignity and the destiny we all long for as Christians.

The Vine and the Branches



Closely linked to the image of the Body of Christ is that of the Vine and the Branches. This refers to Jesus' own teaching in Saint John's gospel during his farewell conversations with his disciples. *"I am the vine and you are the branches... Live in me as I live in you". (John 15)* This natural image enables us to understand the unity between Christ and those who belong to him, who are grafted onto him by being members of the Church.

Other images

Another biblical image for the Church is the Flock of which Christ is the Good Shepherd. He cares for us and looks after us even to the point of laying down his life for his sheep. Here we have only to turn to that well-known passage of John 10.

In other biblical texts we find the Church being referred to as the "Bride of Christ", the Assembly or "ecclesia", and so on. Images of the Church are particularly helpful when we try to understand the mystery of the Church. No single image can exhaust all that we know about the Church. They need to be seen together and even then we don't get the full picture. Just as God is a mystery to us, so too is God's Church. The Church is not merely a social phenomenon. It is a mystery of faith.

What we need to do now is see the Church in our own South African context. Once again, images of the Church can be useful. What was the image people had of the Church when it first arrived in southern Africa?

The Church in South Africa



Care of immigrant Catholics

When the Catholic Church first put down roots in South African soil, it did so as a Church whose primary concern was the spiritual care of immigrant Catholics from Europe. It was a sort of "provider" Church, mainly administering the sacraments to the small white community at the Cape.

Missionary activity

Changing times and circumstances enabled the Church to have another look at its call from God. What were these changes? The first thing was that the interior of Africa began to be explored. The Church became aware of vast numbers of indigenous people that had not even heard of the gospel. And so we see the beginnings of the second phase of the Church's history in this country, what we might call its mainly missionary phase. The Church began to realise that it was being prompted by the Holy Spirit to fulfil the command of Jesus to

"go and make disciples from all nations. Baptize them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Mt 28:19)



Various missionary orders arrived to help with this task and so gradually the Church started to expand its membership beyond the narrow confines of the immigrant communities. We can just imagine those missionary priests, Sisters and Brothers travelling vast distances on horseback trying to reach people in remote areas, setting up schools and clinics and building little churches. In this they were often assisted by the co-operation of lay helpers, especially many dedicated catechists. Not so long ago, Pope John Paul II beatified one such missionary: Blessed Joseph Gerard OMI of Lesotho.