

A proud prime minister visits a nursing home. He goes over to an elderly woman and asks, "Do you know who I am?" She replies, "No, but don't worry darling. If you go to the front desk, they can tell you there."

## **Forgotten identity - Renewing the Catholic Church**

There are many issues in the church: sex abuse scandals, financial scandals, cover ups, hypocrisy, poor witness. I believe a key issue – perhaps underlying some of the other problems - is that the Catholic Church has forgotten her primary identity: to make missionary disciples. That is, to help people encounter Jesus as a personal saviour and redeemer, and to change their life in such a way so that he is at the centre of every aspect of their lives.

It is clear we have forgotten how to do this. The church is in decline in the West. We've done all we can, but most/all our favourite loved ones have left the church. This is painful. I know because all my siblings have stopped too.

I also know because I stopped going to church as soon as my parents gave me a choice. I lived the life of the prodigal son (parties, etc). I went through some personal challenges (depression and unemployment). I turned to Jesus in my time of need. Over time, I started to read the bible, go back to church, commit to living a life as a disciple in the church. I answered the call to become a priest. And here I am now!

I didn't come back to the church because I missed church. I came back because of Jesus. The Church teaches that a personal relationship with Jesus (not the church) is the ultimate meaning of being a Catholic. But there is a huge chasm between what the church teaches about who we are (Jesus' personal disciples), and our lived experience (slaves of the Church). Something is drastically wrong. The Catholic Church needs to renew its identity.

There are 3 keys to renewing the Church's identity: **evangelisation**, **leadership**, and **the Holy Spirit**.

**Evangelisation** – John: “Anyone who ... eat[s] my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life ... He... lives in me and I live in him” Life is Jesus! Not primarily the church. This is good news, because the people we are called to reach are sceptical of organised religion. People are curious about Jesus. We need to provide a space for people to explore, question freely, and encounter him. Alpha is an 11-week series that explores freely the big questions about Jesus. If you are a Catholic curious about how to pass faith on, or want to know if there's anything more to faith, or not that religious, try alpha. Renewing the church's identity is not about prioritising the church. Renewing the church's identity is about prioritising **Jesus**.

**Leadership** – Proverbs: “Wisdom has built herself a house” and invites all to eat her bread there. Wise leaders build with others. Jesus is a servant leader who built teams. To renew the Catholic Church's identity, we need all people becoming servant leaders in teams. It's been said leadership is like a flock of ducks flying in 'V' formation. One person leads a team, but they drop back to allow others to take the lead. We need to move away from the model of priests and religious doing everything, and making decisions, all alone. We need to move toward **servant leader teams**. I have a servant leadership team around me to help me make better decisions. I want a longer-term strategy team too. We have a service sheet on the noticeboard. If you haven't already especially, join a team. Renewing the Catholic Church's identity is about **servant leadership** in teams.

**Holy Spirit** – Eph: “Do not drug yourselves with wine ... be filled with the Spirit.” The meaning of Ephesians is not just to be filled once, but to go on being filled. Receiving the Holy Spirit didn't start and stop at our confirmation! We need to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit. Why? Who here had the fear of God put into them by the Church? Rom 5:5 says, “the **love** of God is poured into our hearts by the **Holy Spirit**.” Reject fear. Go on being filled with God's love, by the Holy Spirit. I envision the Catholic Church – and us -

having lay-led ministries after Mass that offer people prayer to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit renews the Catholic Church's identity.

Brothers and sisters, I have a ridiculous ambition: to transform the whole Catholic Church and our Parish. Not to make the church something it's not. But to help it become who we officially teach we are: a community of Jesus' missionary disciples.

Will you join me in this renewal? If so, try or invite people to alpha, grow as a servant leader and join a team, pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

### **Prayer**

Jesus, thank you for instituting the church. We are sorry for all the church's failings.

Help us to **evangelise** and put you at the centre of all we do and are.

Help us to grow in your example of **servant leadership**.

**Come, Holy Spirit**, go on filling me and us with God's love.

Help us go out to others with your love, transforming society, and the whole Catholic Church, in your holy name, amen!