

When I Say I'm a Christian

Homily for August 6-7th 2022
19th Sunday Ordinary Time

I want to share with you a poem that I spoke to me when I read it the other day. I hope and pray it will speak to you too.

"When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I'm not shouting, 'I've been saved!' I'm whispering, 'I get lost!' That's why I chose this way.

When I say 'I am a Christian,' I don't speak with human pride. I'm confessing that I stumble – needing God to be my guide.

When I say 'I am a Christian,' I'm not trying to be strong. I'm professing that I'm weak and pray for strength to carry on.

When I say 'I am a Christian,' I'm not bragging of success. I'm admitting that I've failed and cannot ever pay the debt.

When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I don't think I know it all. I submit to my confusion asking humbly to be taught.

When I say 'I am a Christian,' I'm not claiming to be perfect. My flaws are far too visible, but God believes I'm worth it.

When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I still feel the sting of pain. I have my share of heartache which is why I seek His name.

When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I do not wish to judge. I have no authority – I only know that I am loved."

When our reading from Hebrews says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen”, I think this poem is a clear expression of what this verse means. The poem speaks of our willingness to admit that we are vulnerable and weak, always open to the renewing grace of God as we trust in God’s infinite goodness and love.

In the Hebrews reading we see this character in Abraham - someone who is vulnerable because he is charting terrain he had never before crossed, as an old man. He is also confident in the infinite goodness and love of God. Notice we are told that Abraham sets out trusting God but is uncertain as to where the future will take him. We are also told that he is living in a foreign land in tents as will Isaac and Jacob who will come after him.

What does this tell us about the person of faith? While we are in this world we are so to speak always on the move, not at home. Even if this isn’t true literally it is so figuratively. We heard in the Old Testament passage from Wisdom the retelling of the story where God delivered the

people from the bondage of Egypt. However, such deliverance required of the people that they would share in both the blessings and dangers that resulted from living by faith as they would be on the move.

To live by faith is also to have the assurance that although our earthly future is at times obscure and hidden from us, we have an assurance of the destiny where this earthly journey will lead us. Hebrews has one of the clearest images of heaven in the whole of the New Testament:

Abraham looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

The man and woman of faith always keeps their eyes focused on the ultimate hope – the sharing of life in the eternal heavenly city. Such an assurance allows us to live in the temporal earthly cities never giving up or losing hope. We see this in the example of Abraham’s wife, Sarah, who received power to conceive even when she was well beyond the age of child bearing. Why is this? Because in her vulnerability and weakness she “considered him faithful who had promised”. Although Abraham and Sarah would never see realized the fulfillment of what God would accomplish through them, Hebrews speaks of their descendants “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore”.

The kind of faith we see represented in the Hebrews reading and the poem “Why I am a Christian” is what I believe we saw embodied by Pope Francis as he walked together with us on his Penitential Pilgrimage July 24th -29th. We saw the Holy Father’s vulnerability in his physical frailty and saw his trust in God’s infinite goodness and love as he spoke with such forthrightness about the suffering that “so many Catholic Christians” visited on those under their care in the residential schools.

In his meeting with the First Peoples at Maskwacis he stated how much it had meant to him to hear from representatives of the First Nations, Metis and Inuit when they came to Rome in March. He then stated:

*Today I am here, in this land that, along with its ancient memories, preserves the scars of still open wounds. I am here because the first step of my penitential pilgrimage among you is that of again asking forgiveness, of telling you once more that I am deeply sorry. Sorry for the ways in which, regrettably, many Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed the indigenous peoples. I am sorry. I ask forgiveness, in particular, for the ways in which many members of the Church and of religious communities cooperated, not least through their indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time, which culminated in the system of residential schools. Although Christian charity was not absent, and there were many outstanding instances of devotion and care for children, the overall effects of the policies linked to the residential schools were catastrophic. What our Christian faith tells us is that this was a disastrous error, incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus. It is painful to think of how the firm soil of values, language and culture that made up the authentic identity of your peoples was eroded, and that you have continued to pay the price of this. In the face of this deplorable evil, the Church kneels before God and implores his forgiveness for the sins of her children (cf. JOHN PAUL II, Bull *Incarnationis Mysterium* [29 November 1998], 11: AAS 91 [1999], 140).*

I myself wish to reaffirm this, with shame and unambiguously. I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the indigenous peoples.¹

When speaking in Rome at his Wednesday Audience on August 3rd the Holy Father said his Canadian Pilgrimage was unlike any other apostolic journey he has taken (Canada was his 37th trip since his papacy began in March 2013).

Not only did he embody the language characteristic of the poem with which I began today's homily, he also spoke repeatedly about the Church walking together with the First Peoples of Canada as we look go the future, in a way reminiscent of Abraham. It will be a direction that will be new for many of us and will invite us to walk not from a position of power but vulnerably and trustingly. Please listen to these words from Pope Francis' Monday evening homily when in Edmonton at the Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples.

The word “reconciliation” is in fact practically synonymous with the word “Church”. It comes from the word “council”, and it means “meet again in council”. The Church is the house where we “conciliate” anew, where we meet to start over and to grow together. It is the place where we stop thinking as individuals and acknowledge that we are brothers and sisters of one another. Where we look one another in the eye, accept the other’s history and culture, and allow the mystique of togetherness, so pleasing to the Holy Spirit, to foster the healing of wounded memories. This is the way: not to decide for others, not to pigeonhole everyone within our preconceived categories, but to place ourselves before the crucified Lord and before our brothers and sisters, in order to learn how to walk together. That is what the Church is, and should always be – the place where reality is always superior to ideas. That is what the Church is, and always should be – not a set of ideas and precepts to drill into people; the Church is a welcoming home for everyone! That is what the Church is, and ever should be: a building with doors always open.²

It is my prayer that here at St Peter's we will in the months ahead enter more fully into the kind of conciliar encounters that Pope Francis is inviting us to share with the First Peoples. We have a group of parishioners who have been meeting since the spring to prayerfully consider what walking together can look like in our community and we join with Bishop McGrattan to further the call to “Walk Together”. If you would like to join this conversation please speak to me after Mass today.

May we pray that Pope Francis' time amongst us will inspire us to say and live the prayer with which he concluded his Monday evening homily.

Lord Jesus, crucified and risen, you dwell here, in the midst of your people, and you want your glory to shine forth through our communities and in our cultures. Jesus, take us by the hand, and even through the deserts of history, continue to guide our steps on the way of reconciliation. Amen.

¹ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-popolazioniindigene-canada.html>

² <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-incontroedmonton-canada.html>