



A while back we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the moon-landing. The original achievement grasped the world's imagination then, and its commemoration stimulated more reflection in recent weeks. One comment by an anonymous high school student caught my attention. The student rather profoundly reflected that we have conquered "outer space" but have held back from the trickier but immensely more significant challenge of "inner space" – the world of spirituality.

Changing Demographics

A reality that we in the Catholic Church have had to face in recent years has been a steady attrition in the numbers of formerly committed members. I gather that many other Christian Churches face a similar situation. In our case a significant reason has been the feeling of deep disillusionment and disgust with the institutional Church, felt by so many in light of the tragedy of wide-spread child sexual abuse, perpetrated and covered up by too many priests, religious and bishops. I feel that pain and shame myself, though my response has been to stay in the institution in the hope of contributing to a radical cultural change from within.

Re-structuring

With the steady decrease in formal commitment, for whatever reasons, parish communities have become noticeably smaller and priests have become fewer. As a diocese, we have had to look hard at servicing the numerous faith communities scattered around this western half of Victoria. One outcome has been that the five former parishes of Hamilton, Casterton, Coleraine, Peshurst and Edenhope, served only twenty years ago by seven or eight priests, have recently become one single parish served by only two priests. They are now known as the Western Border Parish under the general direction of one parish priest [Fr Paddy Mugavin, temporarily aided by newly-ordained Redemptorist priest, Fr Doan] residing in Hamilton, and an assistant priest [Fr Anthony Nagothu] taking care of the faith communities further to the West.

Local Patron

The new parish has aptly chosen as its patron St Mary MacKillop. St Mary was familiar with this area, and the grave of her father can be found in the Hamilton Old Cemetery. Mary herself was a visionary woman for her era, a woman prepared to work for change and to adapt to the requirements of the place and the time. She was particularly concerned for the Christian education of the children of the region, especially the poorest. For a time, generous women of the Religious Congregation that she founded worked in the small Catholic school at Coleraine.

Role-Model

Today the Church faces the need for radical change in order to become relevant once more to our world of the present and the future. This is an age where less and less people [with a few exceptions – Thank God!], are prepared to show allegiance to formal institutions of any kind, and perhaps especially to the Catholic Church. St Mary saw clearly that the bishops and the clergy made up only a small portion of the Church, not only as the Body of Christ, but even as flawed institution and pilgrim people. Woman that she was, she had a wonderful sense of freedom. Her response to God's inspiration to found her Congregation of religious did not originate from any bishop. Indeed, she had trouble in later years from bishops wanting to interfere with her original vision. For a time, her local bishop outrageously excommunicated her, largely due to the influence on him of a powerful priest who deeply resented her support for a Sister who had courageously denounced the sexual abuse of a child in her care by a priest-friend of his. Despite all that, St Mary's closeness to Christ remained undaunted.

Mission, not Maintenance

Interestingly, in our time, an increasing number of people feel drawn to a deeper spirituality of some kind, even those who are unwilling to become institutionally committed. Some are drawn to Christ, perhaps more not so. But this is where ordinary Christian parishioners come into their own. No one can stop them growing ever closer to Christ. No one can stop them witnessing to the wonder of Christ, and to his way of love. No one can prevent their lifestyle exerting a wonderful attraction to maturity and to true human and spiritual growth. Faith communities may become smaller, but their faithful members can become Light to the World – if only they deliberately take steps to deepen their oneness with Christ.

Fr John McKinnon