

CatholicCare Victoria Opening and Commissioning Mass Melton South, March 24, 2021

In Ballarat last Sunday afternoon, we had an Interfaith Forum. There were representatives from several Christian communities, and also from Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Baha'i communities. The gathering was arranged by the Ballarat Interfaith Network. The theme was Unity in Diversity.

In the course of the afternoon, we heard from the various faith communities. They shared something of their teachings and their religious practices. There was a lot of diversity. It was already obvious in the different ways people dressed. The Buddhist monk wore his orange robes. The Muslim woman wore her hijab veil. The Sikh wore his turban. At the same time, as the members of the panel spoke about their faith traditions, there was considerable unity. There were common elements as they referred to a transcendent view of life. There was a common desire to promote harmony among people and care for people in need.

As we gather for our CatholicCare Victoria Mass this afternoon, I see some parallels with that Interfaith Forum. We don't have the same wide range of religious communities. In fact, we gather with a strong emphasis on a Catholic identity, celebrating the formation of CatholicCare Victoria. And yet, there is diversity among us as we gather from the four dioceses of Victoria. Melbourne, Sale, Sandhurst, Ballarat. Each of our diocesan communities has our own history, our own customs, our own way of life. In our social service agencies, we've developed our own ways of caring for those in need. As we come together as CatholicCare Victoria, we're bringing together this diversity. In our CatholicCare Mass this afternoon, we can celebrate and foster this unity in diversity.

As we work together to provide services across Victoria, I hope we'll discover the particular gifts that each person and each community brings to this ministry. The diversity, the variety of gifts, this will enrich our service. At the same time, I hope we'll discover the bonds that bind us in unity, particularly the bonds of our faith.

We've become CatholicCare Victoria. We've become a state-wide service and we'll need to give a lot of attention to coordination across the state. There'll be a need for state-wide planning and management. However, as we attend to these important tasks of planning and management, it will also be important that we remember our inspiration. We're CatholicCare Victoria, so we need state-wide organisation. We are also CatholicCare Victoria. It's vital that we draw on the inspiration of our Catholic faith.

Here I would simply note two elements of that faith. Ours is a faith that calls us to care for those in need. Ours is also a faith that calls for a deep relationship with God. We could say that it's a faith of care and prayer.

As a great example of care, we have the parable of the Good Samaritan, a parable of compassion, a parable of practical help for the person beaten up by the robbers.

As another message about care, we have the words of this afternoon's gospel. "Blessed are the merciful." Where there is suffering, we're called to offer the soothing balm of mercy. "Blessed are the peacemakers." Where there is discord, we're called to promote peace.

How is this call to care for those in need linked to our relationship with God? We find a clue in the first of our readings this afternoon, the text from the first letter of St John. This brings together the assurance of God's love for us and the call to be loving ourselves. "My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God. God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him. Since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another."

In our service as CatholicCare Victoria, we can draw great inspiration from the Scriptures. They call us to the way of compassion, the way of love. As we rejoice in God's love for us, we're called to share that love with those we meet along the way.

We can also draw inspiration from the Eucharist. There can be a wonderful interplay between the service we offer to people in need and the liturgy we celebrate at the altar.

This was beautifully illustrated in a story I heard about Mother Teresa. It was a story told by the English journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge. He wrote a book called *Something Beautiful for God*. It was set in India. It was an account of the work of Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity, particularly their ministry of caring for the poor in Calcutta.

Malcolm Muggeridge observed that Mother Teresa and the Sisters always started their day with prayer. They would attend an early morning Mass in their chapel. Then they would go out into the city streets. There they would find the sick and the dying. Some of these people had no homes. They would be suffering and even dying on the side of the road. The Sisters would do what they could to give them comfort.

One morning, as they were preparing for their work, Mother Teresa spoke to the Sisters. She referred to the Mass they'd been to that morning and she also referred to the tasks that lay ahead of them that day. She said, "This morning, Sisters, we were at Mass and we saw how reverently the priest held the Body of Christ as the altar. Today, in the streets, we'll meet the sick and dying. We must likewise hold them reverently, for they too are the Body of Christ."

As we celebrate the Eucharist this afternoon, may our hearts be warmed by love. May we grow in reverence for Christ here at the altar. May we grow in reverence for Christ as we meet him in those who are in need. In this Mass, we're celebrating as CatholicCare Victoria. From here, we'll move out to serve as CatholicCare Victoria. May the prayer we share today inspire the care we show in the days ahead.

Bishop Paul Bird CSsR