Words for Catholic Union on Evangelisation and Discipleship - 3rd November 2026

I have been invited to share a few reflections on the Church's work in Evangelisation and Discipleship. I do so by sharing with you the experience of two new Catholics who were baptised last Easter. One of the great privileges of being a bishop is that in the Rite of Election I get to meet those on this journey. As in many dioceses across England and Wale, over the past two years, we have noted an upturn in the numbers of young people, and especially men, coming into the Church.

So, to these two young people. The first is Sophie, a young woman in her early twenties, who came from no belief. Sophie said that her seeking began during Covid. She worked in the Healthcare sector. She experienced much suffering at close hand. She began to see that life was very fragile and whether you lived or died, seemingly arbitrary. She began to ask herself, "Is this all there is? Does life have no purpose?" She said, "I'll go look at the Churches because they're supposed to have some answers." The first week she went to a Church in Wales Anglican service, the following week to the Baptists, then to the Pentecostals, then to the Methodists. Then she went to her local Catholic Church for Mass. I don't know why we were so down the list - maybe a bit of residual prejudice in the culture? She said she enjoyed being at Mass, and afterwards one of the parishioners invited her into the hall for tea or coffee. She said that they were really friendly and welcoming. As she was telling me this, I thought to myself 'Thank God she went to one of those parishes'!

She said that there was one woman who was particularly kind and warm towards her. She began to talk to her gently about Our Lady, about Mary in the Gospels as a strong, compassionate woman who would guide Sophie. She introduced her to the rosary. Sophie had never heard anyone talk about Mary before and then she said something very beautiful and very profound, which touched me deeply, and still does. She said, "When I met the tenderness of Mary in the life of the Church, I knew I was at home. I knew she would bring me close to Jesus."

The young man, Ivor's journey was different. It started from a similar place, from no belief, but his search was different. He said he was aware of how unstable everything in the world is - wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, a breakdown in any sense of what is real and true. For him, the search for Truth was paramount. His search did not take him to the Churches. He searched online. He explored the various belief systems and religious traditions. He found a resonance in Christianity, was helped by YouTube pieces by Jordan Peterson, Bishop Robert Barron, and Fr Mike Schmitz. What attracted him to Catholicism most, he said, is it sense of coherence. He recognised that things had changed in the Church through the centuries but he said he could see that the essentials were all there. He could experience Jesus Christ in the present Church as the Apostles experienced him in

Apostolic times. He said he particularly loved the Truth of the Church's teaching, and he found in belief in the Real Presence of Jesus, in the Eucharist, that there is something he could build his life on.

Sophie and Ivor, and so many thousands of others like them, encountered Jesus in our Church and want to keep on journeying with him, as his disciples. They met their *Kairos* moment and responded generously to it. This is at the heart of any talk of evangelisation and discipleship.

Not only new Catholics, but all of us, in the Church, are at a *Kairos* moment. You will know that this word *Kairos* is translated as 'time' in the New Testament, as in the sentence, "At that time". But it contains much more than this. It does not so much refer to tick tok time, counted minute by minute. That's usually described as *Kronos* in Greek. But *Kairos* refers to a time of crisis, of transformation…a time of decision, a time of encounter.

I believe we are living through such a time. In such a moment we need to remember very deeply, "**Who** we are and **whose** we are?" This is vital for pondering evangelisation in our culture, in this post Christian era, (or as Mgr James Shea more creatively names i n his seminal work "we are living in a new Apostolic era"). Firstly, "**Whose** are we". The content of our message is a person. It is the personal encounter with Jesus which makes us disciples and sets us on a road of following Him and inviting others to be part of this encounter and this journey. We come back again and again to the primary proclamation of Jesus as Lord. As Pope Francis so beautifully reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave His life to save you, and He is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you" (EG 164).

It is clear that our present Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV lives out of this truth.

How different our lives would be, how different our ecclesial structures would be, if we remembered this, too.

It also frames, our answer to the question "Who am I? Who are we?" It seems to me, that in reflecting on this, we encounter three communities of people. Firstly, ourselves - we each want to grow in our personal encounter with the Lord and in being His Missionary disciples. So, the Church in our countries seeks to embolden all those who practise their faith to also be evangelisers, people on fore with their love of Jesus that they want others to encounter him, too.

Secondly, we want to try and reach those who for whatever reason have given up the practice of our faith. Despite those green shoots we see in people, and especially younger people, coming to the Church, in most Dioceses across the UK, Church-

going populations have at least halved in the past thirty years. Those that haven't have been bolstered by incoming migrant communities. We know this heartache in our own families, and friendship network. Sometimes we call this group "the lapsed". I don't really like that term and I'm not too sure that its accurate. For when asked people in this group will often describe themselves as "Catholic". They are there very often with us at Christmas, Easter, and other major sacramental or significant moments in theirs, or others, lives. Perhaps a better description, might be "unengaged Catholics". To call them so, manifests a link with the first group, many of whom do practice, but who can also sometimes be quite unengaged. So, a key reflection is how do we encourage and reach out to unengaged Catholics?

And thirdly, there is the large group of those who have no Christian faith. Latest census statistics indicate that more than 50% of people in our countries now say that they do not believe in God. Of course, it is not a homogenous group. A piece of recent research, titled "Teaching Jesus", showed that half of those who have no faith and who are between the ages of 18 and 24, indicated that they did not think that Jesus was an historical figure. To them, he is some kind of superhero, a mythical figure, a bit like the Marvel characters who appear now in those films which are among the most watched movies of all time in the Cinemas and online.

But that same research indicates that 32% of those who indicate they have no faith, are spiritually open, they are what some call "seekers". Of these, 61% of the women and 39% of the men indicate they do not believe that science explains everything; they are perhaps more open to a spiritual and religious journey.

And a final fascinating figure about this group. 80% believe in some form of the supernatural. The fact of the matter is that there is a vacuum of transcendence and the sacred in our society. And so, 80% of those who do not believe are searching for it. Only it is not religious – its ghouls and ghosts, angelology, flying saucers, tarot, witchcraft, some form of life after death, and so no. You will know the saying of G K Chesterton, "When people stop believing in God, it is not that they believe in nothing; they believe in anything"!

Being able to walk alongside these individuals today is a key task of believers. It requires substantial imagination and risk for us to reach out to some of these 'seekers'. But we do so in order to be more faithful and courageous missionary disciples of the Lord ourselves. May the good Lod grant us the boldness and generosity to walk this path.

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