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John Cummins

## Silver Jubilee Reflections

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John Cummins

In reflecting on how I came to be a priest and still remain one, I'm surprised at how little has changed. While experience has tempered my idealism and some new factors, events and people have entered into the story, either challenging or sustaining me, much of what originally inspired me holds true. I'm very optimistic about priesthood. I like being a priest; I believe in the priesthood. In answering the call to priesthood, I believe that I am fulfilling God's plan for me, and as such, it is the most authentic way of life that I could possibly choose. But yet I wonder if that would be enough to keep someone else going; at the end of the day, it's a personal story, unique to every priest. St. Peter reminds us always to have a reason for the hope that is within you; in other words, know what it is that keeps you going. This essay offers me the opportunity to reflect on what keeps me going, on the reasons for the hope that is within me, that deep confidence in the love of God which never departs.

I was ordained on 16 June 1991, a day on which Kildare lost the National League Final Replay to Dublin. My first four years of ministry were spent in Naas where I learnt a huge amount and where my enthusiasm and idealism both grew and matured. 1995 took me to Rome and further studies. Life in the Eternal City was a joy, although I'm afraid I didn't develop anything like the inside track on the Vatican that many at home thought was a given. In fact, I had little interest in life across the Tiber; it was part of the broader picture, a privilege to be a spectator, but that was enough. Being in Rome opened my eyes to the limitations of our perspective in Ireland, both as Church and as society. But it also opened up a truly global city, a city with its finger on the pulse of the world. For the ancient Romans, Rome was the centre of civilisation; I didn't think that that had changed much. Back from Rome, I spent 5 years as chaplain in the Institute of Technology, Carlow. Here I encountered the semi-state structure and had the opportunity to compare that institution with the Church, which didn't fare badly in

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Father John Cummins, R.I.P., died tragically on 30 January 2019. He wrote this reflection following the celebration of his Silver Jubilee of ordination.

the comparison. I have many happy memories from the I.T. While there, I was appointed to work with Accord Carlow, the Catholic Marriage Care Service, and also took up a role with our diocesan services, later named the Faith Development Services. This offered great scope for involvement in pastoral initiatives in the diocese. In 2005, I was appointed curate in the Cathedral Parish, Carlow and in 2006 became administrator in that parish, where I'm constantly enthused by the deep faith and commitment of parishioners who seek to respond to the movement of God in their daily lives.

#### FAITH SUSTAINS

Faith itself has been the main sustaining factor of the last 25 years—the conviction that my life has meaning, that God has called me to something, even if it is not given to me to understand it. I've received immense strength from the Christian message itself, and so I have been surprised and disappointed at how people have rejected the Church because of the weakness and sinfulness of its leaders. Church leaders have always been weak and sinful - right from the time of Peter. The companions Christ chose abandoned him, and yet he sent these very people out after his resurrection to proclaim the good news.

While they were transformed by their encounter with the Risen Jesus and by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, they still had to face the rest of the disciples, who knew that they had deserted Jesus in his need, who knew that Peter had denied him, who saw the disfunction of the 12 exposed in the betrayal and subsequent death of Judas. It can't have been easy. But the messenger is not the message. Society discredits the message because the credibility of the messenger is in doubt. The Church is not alone in this; it's how society works.

On the other hand, our message is about the Incarnation - the message takes flesh; it's meant to take flesh in us priests and in all Christians, so there's a validity in the criticism that points to the flaws in the messenger, for, like it or not, we embody the message. It makes you wonder about priests and our integrity as messengers of the gospel. What is our relationship with the message we bear? Is it clear? Do we value it? Is it real for us? If we don't value the message, how can we be messengers? Has our way of life lost its credibility? I remember years ago in seminary wondering if we were too comfortable, our lives not radical enough? In middle age, I'm much more comfortable than I was then, and Pope Francis, in his simplicity, challenges my middle-class comfort and lifestyle. As a seminarian, I remember a visiting priest, a Vocations Director from a diocese not my own, coming to Maynooth and asking the

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seminarian from his diocese who had arranged the room for him, to make sure he had two pillows, because as he said “after all he’d given up, it was the least he deserved.” At the time, in my youthful idealism, I was horrified much to the amusement of the other seminarian, who still reminds me of it. I’ve always been of the view that because we have chosen this way of life, therefore we don’t deserve anything. We are servants called to do our duty. However I find that more and more I’m slipping into the “two pillow-priesthood” - both mine, I’d hasten to add! People tend to insulate themselves with the comforts of life - small though they may be, and while there’s nothing wrong with that and even the saints enjoyed their treats, we need to be careful that they do not insulate us from the radicalness of the call to discipleship and the mission that flows from it.

## WHAT KEEPS US GOING?

So coming back to that question, what keeps me going on the journey? Many priests find that what is life-giving is everyday parish life, the experiences of the women, men and children who are part of our communities, who offer friendship and support and are open to the message that we try to bring. In sharing their lives, with all the ups and downs, we priests live life at its fullest and most meaningful, touching the very mysteries of existence as they unfold in daily life. Someone asked me once what was the source of my joy? The question surprised me, and my immediate thought was of my family who have sustained me - sometimes unknowingly - at some of the darker moments of ministry, particularly during the days after the Murphy Report. But the presence of the Lord has been even stronger.

The Italians have a prayer “*May the joy of the Lord be your strength.*” It’s a phrase I keep coming back to, and at times I use it as a mantra, and find that it lifts the spirit immensely. I believe that the source of our joy lies in our relationship with God. We might find great satisfaction in the work we do, great life and great hope in the people we work with and minister to, and many times of celebration and happiness, but the real lasting joy comes from our relationship with God. For us celibates, that is the primary relationship in our lives, and not just in our lives, it is the primary relationship in everyone’s life. Our celibacy witnesses to that primacy in a unique way. But that witness means nothing if it is not real, if it is not lived, if the relationship that we claim to be the primary relationship is not in fact the primary relationship. May the joy of the Lord be your strength; it’s so much easier to rejoice in the Lord when we know him. This leads us to the place

that we give to our prayer. Prayer is about the time and space we give to God and that he gives to us. We preach about it to others; we sometimes struggle with it ourselves. Sometimes it's good, but many times nothing happens. Yet it has the power to sustain us, to give us nourishment and meaning, and to bring us into the presence of the one who is the origin of all life and all love. Prayer is the place of complete honesty, where, like Adam in the garden of Eden, we cannot hide before God. He knows us through and through, and so here we find the place where we are known completely and yet utterly loved and accepted.

Two other phrases summarise much of what has inspired and energised me over the years. These are like mantras or mottos, phrases that have given me comfort, courage, enthusiasm and peace as they were needed. One is a version of Luke 23:46, a paraphrase of Ps 30:5,15, "*Father, I place my life in your hands.*" This is the prayer of faith, of trust, of confidence in whatever God might have in store for me. Belief in God's plan for us, in his love for us, in his providence removes an awful lot of the stress from life.

The other phrase is from psalm 26: "*It is your face O Lord that I seek.*" This is about mission; it expresses the final destiny of humanity, to behold God face to face in the beatific vision, but it also expresses the mission to see the face of God in his people. It strikes me that our mission today is to be Veronica and to wash clean the face of Christ in today's world, to reveal the face of Christ in his body, the Church, where it has been sullied and is no longer visible to a lot of people. Here we are called to reveal Christ to the world in all his beauty and love. The call to seek the face of Christ in his people is a call to serve him in the people of our parishes and communities, and to seek him also beyond the safe confines of our churches, as Pope Francis reminds us. The good shepherd left the ninety-nine to seek the one who was lost; that one too bears the face of Christ that we seek.

#### HOLY ORDERS

All Christians are called to exercise leadership in the Church, but in very different ways. Our baptism establishes each one of us as members of the Christian family, called to follow Christ, called to witness to him. The baptismal call is coming more and more into its own, and the leadership of lay people is finding both a voice and a means of expression.

Holy Orders however, has always been seen as a particular gift that Christ has given, not to individuals, but to the Church. Priesthood is not simply about the priest, it's about the community he serves. A priest is one who answers the call of Christ in a

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particular way, choosing to live the baptismal vocation, not in marriage or single life as most other people do, but in modelling his life on Christ and being united with him in a particular way of life, united with Christ through the sacrament of ordination, through a life of prayer, both personal and public, and through the ministry of service. I have always seen the priest as someone called to offer his life in union with Christ's; he is the one who says on behalf of Christ during the Eucharist "this is my body, given up for you." Saying these words at Mass challenges me to make them my own. While they echo the call of all Christians to give their lives for others in imitation of Christ, nonetheless it is the priest who follows the example of Christ in offering his life for all; it is the priest who says those words in the liturgy on behalf of Christ, and so is called to witness to them in a distinctive manner. Priestly celibacy is a particular expression of that offering, made not to one person, but for the community.

The task of proclaiming Christ is more urgent than ever before. Since the election of Pope Francis, whose patron was entrusted with the rebuilding of the Church during a mystical experience in Assisi, a new period in our history is beginning. Our world is crying out for hope and for meaning. Our Church needs new vision and energy. It still needs shepherds who will lead God's people into union with him, shepherds who will uncover the holiness of God's people and reveal the face of God. Jesus points towards his unique relationship with the Father when he says "The Father and I are one". But it is also the goal of our life in Christ. We are called to union with God, and there is a crying need for priests who will witness to that call in their own lives and lead people towards it in their ministry. Stephen Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People" was very popular a few years ago.

One of the habits he suggested was to begin with the end in mind - in other words, have a goal and keep it in sight. In the busyness of life, we might forget that we're pilgrims on a journey and our journey has a destination. We're destined for union with God - that's the goal, the proclamation of it is our work and our life. In some measure, we seek to achieve and experience that union already in our communion with God and with one another. Evangelisation is part of the journey; the Kingdom of God is the goal. Keeping that goal in mind is important every day because not only does it remind me that I'm not alone, but it also allows me to keep a sense of perspective about my life and its relative unimportance - I'm part of the picture, not the whole picture - that's Christ. I don't always have to get it right - God will use our failures as well as our failures. For me, it's important just to be on the journey.

## EUCHARIST AND OFFERING

When I was a child, my mother used to say our prayers with us in the mornings before going to school. She always began with the Morning Offering. She told us *not* to say “I offer you all *my* prayers, works and sufferings”, but rather “I offer you all *the* prayers, works and sufferings of this day” because then, not only were you offering your own life, but everyone else’s as well, so that everything you did and everyone else did would be a prayer. If you followed her logic, well then you might never need to utter another prayer for the rest of your life!

But I took to her logic pretty well, and that notion of offering the whole day, my whole life was part of the daily routine and fed in to my vocation as a priest. It was very eucharistic, and it made a big impact on me, firstly as a child, when I thought it was a great way of doing an awful lot of praying with very little effort. But as an adult, I found in it the roots of a Eucharistic spirituality, where in the bread and wine offered on the altar, we offer also all that they represent - fruits of creation representing the entire creation, work of human hands, telling of all that is human, so that the preparation of the gifts becomes something more than just the preparation of the bread and wine, but the presentation of life, creation and all that is human, in its joy and hope, anguish and sorrow. All of it is offered to Christ, all of it is transformed, all of it becomes a new creation, the sign of the transformation of all in Christ, when God will be all in all.

Here in the Eucharist, all of life comes together. Each person comes with an individual story; each comes to touch and to share the life of God. But God is not afraid to touch our lives and to share them. He knows our stories so we are not afraid to acknowledge our human frailty and to allow God to touch our vulnerability as we express our need of his loving kindness. Then as a people united in his presence, we take our part as the heavenly liturgy unfolds in our presence.

We are nourished, challenged, healed and uplifted by the proclamation of God’s word, through which Christ becomes present to us. We remember the offering of Christ in his death and resurrection, made present now in bread and wine. The new covenant breaks in among us, rupturing the heaven’s and disclosing Christ’s presence with us, while foretelling creation’s final union with God. Here in the gathering of the Christian people to celebrate the mystery of Christ’s love for us, everything comes together as one. This is the place of unity, the place of nourishment, the place where God’s people are fed on the journey even as they anticipate the banquet at journey’s end. I usually lose people when I start to

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talk about the Eucharist, but I find that this approach helps me to make sense of life and faith, bringing them together in one place and one point. Writers such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jean Corbon, Jeremy O’Driscoll and Paul McPartlan have coloured much of my thinking.

## EUCHARIST AND THE CROSS

We don’t talk much about the cross these days - I’m reminded of a bishop who visited the chapel of a diocesan seminary a few years back and as he looked at the books on the pews, saw the modern book covers of contemporary authors and he wondered at the spiritual reading of the seminarians and said: “Where’s John of the Cross? Where’s Teresa of Avila? All I see are sand-dunes and palm-trees!”

I’m all in favour of sand-dunes and palm-trees - but that’s for holidays. Real life is tough. A teacher in school used to say to us, as he piling on the homework, “Life is hard, lads!” I’ve haven’t forgotten that lesson: life is hard. The cross is part of life, whether we like it or not, and it’s part of the story of the Eucharist, present in the crushing of the grain and grains, present in the offering of Christ on the cross. I received an ordination invitation which had, on its cover, an image of the priest superimposed on the crucifix, sharing the cross with Christ. It spoke of a spirituality that isn’t too popular today. But we have to get to grips with the cross. We cannot put it to one side; we cannot avoid it; we cannot deny it. Because we know that we’ve been there too. We’ve been the body of Christ hanging on the cross, and we may well be in the future as well.

This really excites me about our worship. I’m convinced of Christianity and its truth because of the way that it faces the hard realities of life – suffering, evil, death. Without denying any of them, it offers a meaning and a way forward. God sent his Son among us, not to give us answers, but to be with us – he is Emmanuel, God with us. And God-With-Us lived with us, suffered with us, died with us, showing us that this is how life is. It’s tough and it’s rough, and we mightn’t understand it – and he didn’t seem to understand it very well either in Gethsemane – but we’re not alone. He is with us. Christ didn’t give us answers but he stood by us and suffered with us, and, in fact, went one step further than we do - he went beyond death and revealed to us the new life of the Resurrection. This undreamed of revelation transforms our approach to suffering, not by denying its reality, but through its transformation. Christ gives us no answers, but he showed us the way. Critics of Christianity would talk of the “pie in the sky when you die” spirituality, but it’s

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more about solidarity while you live, knowing Christ is present with you in your suffering. Finding him, placing your hand in his and trusting in the darkness that he will guide you to the fullness of life. The resurrection may even, at times, seem like too much to hope for. But it is the ultimate affirmation and vindication both of the physical body and of human suffering. Created in God's image and likeness, our bodies are enfleshed spirit, and so are destined for life.

### EUCCHARIST AND VOCATION

For me, the Eucharist is at the heart of priesthood. Here is where Christ offered his life, giving us a ritual so that we can participate in his gift of his life on the Cross. It's a privilege to say the words of Christ "take this, this is my body, which will be given up for you." I always feel these words are at the heart of all Christian vocation and all Christian life, where we are called to give our lives in love, as Christ gave his. In marriage, the husband and wife say these words to one another - "this is my body, my life which I give for you"; their life as a Christian married couple originates in this moment, as Christ gives his life to the wife and to the husband in and through each other, nourished and energised by the body of Christ whom they have received, living in them, giving in them, uniting in them. As priest, I say those words, not directly to anyone else, but in the person of Christ, who said them as he gave his life for all. As the person who says those words of Christ on his behalf, I have to make them my own by giving my life for all. My saying these words brings me right into the gift of my life that I am asked to make, the vocation that I am called to follow. These words inspire and nourish my life as a celibate, bringing that part of my life right into the heart of the Eucharist, endowing it a meaning and an energy which keep me going when the day to day living out of celibacy brings its challenges and struggles.

In giving our life, we imitate Christ who washed the feet of the disciples. This is the other great symbol of Eucharist, the *diakonia*, or service that is the essence of Christ's self-gift. This is my body *given for you*...it's for others, for their sake, for our sake, that Christ gave his life, and many beautiful things have been written about the washing of feet over the centuries. So much of our lives is given to the service of others; diocesan priesthood holds that balance between the service of washing feet and the more contemplative offering of bread and wine. The strength of priesthood is not in power, but in service; it lies in the washing of feet. The beauty of priesthood is the face of the Risen Christ revealed in us, for us, and through us. We've been formed to see

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ourselves as *alter Christus*, ‘other Christs’, acting *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. Along the line however, we may have forgotten that it is Christ whom we serve in his people. It is the face of Christ that we see in the faces of our parishioners and others. Often priests have been so preoccupied with their calling to be *alter Christus* that we have forgotten about the Christ whom we serve in the person of the other. Thus, as well as telling stories of generous self-sacrifice, genuine love and inspiring holiness, the history of the priesthood also tells a tale of arrogance and pride, self-absorption and resentment. Obviously these aren’t compatible with priesthood, but they are evidence of the ‘earthen vessels’ which God uses to hold his precious gifts.

Most of all in the Eucharist, I am sustained by the presence of Christ himself. In the frailty of bread, he gives himself, uniting himself to us in a way that is so simple, yet almost beyond belief. To carry within us the presence of God and act as his tabernacle – this is mind-blowing stuff. But when you consider that in receiving Eucharist, we are not simply Christ-bearers, but are united with him because we are fed with him, then we are truly in a space beyond human comprehension. At the end of life’s journey is the union with God, *theosis*, which we can only imagine. But it begins here, through the medium of bread and wine, as we are called into the communion of one body – communion with Christ and with one another, a union with the Church present at the Eucharistic celebration, a union with the Church of all ages, a union with the Church of heaven, a union with Christ, in his living, dying and rising. And so, the very mystery of Christ’s life becomes part of us and part of our lives, as we are caught up into the eternal presence of Christ.

## CONCLUSION

A description of the priest that has always made sense to me is *Interpreter of Life*. We are there to help people make sense of their lives, particularly at the key moments – birth, marriage, illness, death, bereavement, trauma, experiences of meaninglessness, hopelessness, poverty, need, but also helping them to understand and appreciate love, joy, hospitality, sharing, caring. We are interpreters of the mystery of life, helping people to get a glimpse of God’s presence, if not his plan, in their various life experiences. It’s our privilege as diocesan priests to be living at the frontiers of life, the places where life is on the edge, as we struggle to push the boundaries of meaning and belief, hope and love, courage and endurance, and lead our people into faith. We’re more than ministers of the rites of passage who provide a pleasant background

for secular celebrations; we endeavour to lead people into the heart of what those celebrations are truly about; to open their eyes to perceive God's presence; to open their hearts to welcome his love; to open their minds to the deeper wisdom and understanding of the Spirit of God at the critical junctures.

The Church faces many challenges in Ireland today; some of these are political, concerning the credibility of the Church in society etc, but the deeper crises are spiritual. Irish people still are deeply aware of God's presence but are not confident in responding to that awareness in the Church and so search for it elsewhere. Priests need to be sensitive to their searching, and aware too of the richness of the Christian tradition of meditation, mysticism, retreats and holistic spirituality. We need to enhance our ability to articulate that tradition. We also need to be confident in the message we proclaim, and to be able to sit with those who struggle with the Church and to dialogue with them. It's an exciting time to be a priest, a challenging time, one that offers new opportunities for mission and evangelisation. Hopefully we're neither too tired nor too demoralised to embrace these. Ultimately, it comes down to our confidence in God's ability to use us to achieve his purpose, whatever that purpose might be – to let go and to let God. In the words of St. Paul, *Glory be to him, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.* (Eph. 3:20)

While the history of the Church in Ireland over the past 25 years has been pretty dismal, consisting of revelations of scandals, depravity and mismanagement, one might be philosophical and observe that life has always been difficult. Each age brings its own challenges; that's life and the Christian life points to the cross as a constant presence, no matter when we may live. The challenges of our time are ugly, not just because of their unpleasantness, but because they reveal the presence of evil in the heart of the Church and because so many of them are largely of the Church's own making. The scandals of sexual abuse are part of a wider picture of abuse within society which society still fails to confront. Being a priest during the time when these scandals have been uncovered has not been easy and at times you want to escape from it, particularly when you are aware of unfair comment or clergy bashing. We're an easy target. But Christ came to suffer for the guilty and we must share that part of his mission too. So many innocent people suffer when someone commits a crime; the direct victim is not the only victim. Their family and friends are affected and so too is the circle which surrounds the perpetrator, his family, friends and colleagues, no matter what the crime.

I used to think that the Church influenced the culture and society of which it was part; now I wonder if the culture of the Church

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stems, in fact, from the culture of the time, and if it is society which creates the dominant ambiance within the Church rather than vice versa. After all, Church people grow up in families and communities and are moulded in them before ever making an adult commitment to religious life. It's an interesting thought, but one that might too easily let the Church off the hook.

**Prayers of Petition.** When I was a youngster, my piano teacher once observed to me that God always answers our prayers; the only thing, she added, being that sometimes the answer is 'No'. That may seem a glib evasion, but it could have a point: it could be that what we are asking God for may not be good for us. Matthew closes Jesus's remarks about asking and always receiving by having him conclude, 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give *good things* to those who ask him' (Matthew 7:8). What people want is not always what is 'good' for them; and Jesus did not promise that God would always give us everything that we ask for. Discouraging though it may appear, God may know better sometimes, and may decide that what we need is something else rather than what we are begging him for. An old saying warns us, Take care what you pray for: you may get it.

— JACK MAHONEY, SJ, *Glimpses of the Gospels* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 162.