

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE PARISH OF ST JOHN'S OR CHANGING THE FACE OF THE PARISH OF ST JOHN'S?

Talk presented Judy Kenny

CELEBRATING WOMEN!

What a positive title to this gathering! We celebrate especially today, all the women of St John's who have worshipped, prayed, grown in faith, loved and been loved, supported, and been supported by the parish in a hundred different ways; women of all ages who have lived their sturdy faith in homes and workplaces; women who are loyally committed to the parish community. This warm and inspired sense of MSC community is being built on by the recent assembly and the parish pastoral plan. But unless we as a parish are open to change, unless we focus on the big picture of the rapidly changing world and the struggling church within that world, our comfortable parish on the hill could slowly contract, or worse, shrink into insignificance.

Joan Chittister, theologian and ardent supporter of gender equality in the Church, writes: 'Because the world is changing, the church will have to change as well. If the church does not deal with change it will soon become an international relic.' (Joan Chittister. *Catholicism, A changing Church-Despite itself.*

www.huffingtonpost.com/sister-joan-chittister-osb).

And Hans Kung: I am buoyed up by an unshakeable faith. .. not faith in the church as an institution, since quite obviously the church continually fails, but faith in Jesus Christ, his person and cause... The name of Jesus Christ is like the 'golden thread' in the tapestry of church history. Though often the tapestry is torn and grubby, that thread is constantly worked in again. Only the spirit of this Jesus Christ can give the Catholic Church and Christianity generally, a new credibility. (Hans Kung. *The Catholic Church*. Phoenix Press 2001) And Karl Rahner: The Christian of the future will be contemplative or there will be no Christians.

All these writers emphasise prayer, simplicity and lives based on the Jesus Christ of the Gospel. How do we as a parish cherish what *is*, and embrace what *might be*? In the brief time I have I will bonsai just a few issues that might be considered for a changing parish.

CHURCH:

How does our parish keep hope in a Church stained by corruption, power and

paedophilia, a Church backpedalling from the teachings of Vatican II? Will it be a Church humbled and cleansed and returned to the Gospel of Jesus? Are we greeting a new dawn through a Pope who describes his Church as 'perhaps too distant from (peoples') needs, perhaps a prisoner of its own rigid formulas,' a Pope who visits slums, refugee camps and jails, and preaches the simple message of love, compassion and forgiveness?

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NEW PARISH:

The geographical boundary of St John's parish has become wonderfully porous through community members living beyond the boundary, through ease of travel, lightning fast media and cyber communication. Do we need to redefine our notion of 'parish'? How will we find balance and prayer time in our lives in the face of this never-silent cyber-chattering world? How do we use what is valuable, and refuse to be

seduced by the paltry, the unnecessary and the sensational?

PARISH PEOPLE:

Contemporary disenchantment with the church as an institution affects us all. We notice the growing number of empty seats. But we will have noticed also the presence of many migrant families, devout in their faith. Are these families part of our neighbourhood groups? Do we meet with them after Mass, find out their names? Is their presence among us a call to make support for the Refugee Resettlement Committee and the Social Justice Committee top parish priorities? Would this be a practical way of speaking our shame at the shrinking moral horizons and punitive refugee policies which are shaming our nation?

HOSPITALITY:

Hospitality is a ministry at the heart, not the periphery, of our Christian call – a call to welcome people to share joyful, faith-nourishing community liturgies, to make sure people want to keep coming. How can we women make this ministry an important roster, a time and talent commitment, with a leader to train, support and follow-up those who volunteer?

DEFINING 'CATHOLIC':

It's time, isn't it, to expunge the term 'lapsed Catholic' from

our vocabulary. The words of Jesus say so much: "By **this** will everyone know that you are my disciples, if **you have love for one another.**" There is so much evidence of that love in the baptised non-worshipping members of the community. But how as a living, vigorous MSC parish do we inspire others to respond to that other plea of Jesus: 'Do this in memory of me'?

CO-RESPONSIBILITY:

The spirit of Vatican II (and the dwindling number of priests), make co-responsibility central our parish life. Working *with* the priests has always been alive and well here. But can we formalise our co-responsibility, make it known to every parishioner and every visitor on the front page of an enlarged Compact (and the homepage of the website) where the names and email addresses of the priests, the parish staff and every group leader are before us week after week. Thus we can see our parish structure, can be in contact, participate, volunteer, donate, or call for help. (Why, oh why, are the names of the priests and women staff carrying the parish on their shoulders always just lying sideways on the back page?) Also: You may or may not have noticed that the parish pioneers are growing older!

Parishioners under 55 where are you? In the frantic busy-ness that has overtaken your generation how can you make time as a co-responsible group to save the future of the parish?

A WORD OF HOPE:

In Acts chapter 27, St Paul is being taken under guard across the Mediterranean to be tried in Rome. Violent storms constantly lash the ship. He receives a divine message that all will be saved. He proclaims this hope to the seasick men and women passengers. Then in a wonderfully symbolic gesture, he takes bread, gives thanks,

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breaks it and begins to eat, encouraging the fearful passengers also to eat and to take heart. Paul was doing what Jesus did, breaking bread, giving thanks, sharing a meal. Is this where we women are at present - in the midst of gales in society and in the Church, and is this where our Sunday Eucharist is – celebrated right in the midst of the storms? Is it where we take time to give thanks to our calming God who with us in a time of change - here in the parish of St John's? I believe so.