

Christians Meet

From the earliest days the followers of the Way were accustomed to meet on the first day of the week to break bread (e.g. Acts 20:7). In the second century Justin Martyr tells the Roman authorities that, “*on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given.*” (Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, 67) I might simply have noted that Justin said ‘Christians gather’ but his description of what they do at the gathering is so like what we do in the twenty-first century I thought it worth sharing. Much later in the history of the Church, the Catholics in this country gathered to celebrate the Eucharist in secret, all through penal times, despite the threat of imprisonment, torture and execution. We Christians, of our very nature, meet on the Lord’s Day.

We are reminded of this by the Code of Canon Law which states that; “On Sundays...the faithful are obliged to assist at Mass. (CCC 1247) This makes it sound like coercion; you must attend Mass or else...The legal language of a commandment disguises what is really a statement of fact: anyone who aspires to be a disciple of Jesus needs to meet with others of like mind. The purpose of this meeting is that we may share with one another our faith in Christ Jesus and encourage one another in the practice of that faith. We meet to strengthen our identity as disciples of Jesus. If we were to meet only because there is a rule which must be obeyed, there would be something is wrong; we would have missed the point.

And yet today, threatened by a viral pandemic, we are prevented from meeting. Our meeting places remain locked. This is a strange and disorientating experience, a real deprivation. What can we do to maintain our Christian identity? The concept of ‘Identity’ is not invariable well received. This is certainly the case in political discourse where ‘identity politics’ is thought to be divisive. It leads to factionalism and intolerance of other groups who identify differently. Nonetheless, we do need to identify ourselves, to ourselves and to others, as the ‘People of God’. The Second Vatican Council teaches that, “*God does not make people holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring them together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness.*” (Lumen Gentium. 9) When we identify as members of the ‘people who acknowledge God in truth’ our identity cannot lead us to anything but love for all his creatures. To maintain and strengthen this identity we need our fellow Christians.

Even though we cannot gather physically we can express our solidarity by maintaining the times when, normally, we would have met for prayer. To borrow St Justin’s words, we can use that time to read, “The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets.” He

means, of course, the contents of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, neither of which had yet reached its present form when he was writing. We may not be able to share in the sacrament of the Eucharist but we can share in the Word of God by synchronising our reading of the scriptures. We do this by reading at Mass times the passages set in the lectionary for the day and making them the topic of our prayer. Then we can pray, at this time, for one another. Remember, Fr Tom and I keep you in mind at all times. We should pray also for our brothers and sisters in those parts of the world where, because of geographical isolation, or a shortage of priests, they are able to celebrate the Eucharist together only very infrequently in ordinary times.