

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners,

In recent weeks the former President of Ireland, Professor Mary McAleese, has been in the news very frequently. She has been highly critical of the World Meeting of Families in Dublin and has declared that, while happy to meet Pope Francis as a member of the official state reception line-up, she will not be attending any session of the WMOF. One of the issues she has raised is one which caused St. Augustine quite a number of headaches in North Africa over one thousand five hundred years ago, i.e. the question of whether or not baptism should be conferred on infants. Professor McAleese, a distinguished constitutional lawyer who has also taken a degree in Canon Law, approaches the question out of a concern for human rights. By having their religion decided for them, and by becoming members of the Church before they have any say in the matter, are the human rights of children being infringed?

St. Augustine and the other Church Fathers, who discussed this issue in a singularly animated exchange those many centuries ago, clearly did not see the question from a human rights perspective. But then, with all due respects to Mrs. McAleese, most contemporary parents do not either. And certainly the question would never have crossed our parents' minds. Most of us who are adults today were presented for baptism by our parents soon after we were born. They sensed that becoming a Christian was a blessing that they should open up to us at a very early age. At baptism we were united to Christ in a special way, becoming members of his mystical body, the Church, receiving a share in his Spirit, who prompted us to cry out 'Abba, Father' to God, as Christ did.

In presenting us for baptism, our parents were making a fundamental decision on our behalf. They made that decision because they valued their own relationship with the Lord and with his Church, and they wanted us to share in it as soon as possible. What Mrs. McAleese has done, in addition to challenging the received wisdom of the Church and criticizing its teaching – including that of the great Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom and Augustine – and that of recent popes, including Pope Francis – is that she has created an occasion for us all to reflect on baptism and on the promises, made on our behalf as infants, which we renew each year at the Easter Vigil. It is a question of our identity, of who we are and of how we want to live our lives. If we see Baptism as a gift, as the first and essential sacrament, as the first and defining out-reach of Jesus Christ to us on life's journey then, *pace* Professor McAleese, we cannot get it soon enough! If the World Meeting of Families, held in Dublin this week and reaching its culminating point with the visit of Pope Francis on Sunday, is to achieve its goal, it has to begin with a re-appropriation of our baptismal vows and a deeper understanding of what Baptism demands of us.

Father Patrick