

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and visitors to the parish website,

This week-end finds me on retreat. I am at the Abbey of Clervaux in Luxembourg. The abbey is situated on a forested promontory overlooking a deep river valley in which is situated the small town of Clervaux. For the first twenty-three years of my priestly life, I lived next to busy ring roads and, even on Christmas night, I could hear cars and trucks trundle by. So I always slept against a murmur of continual noise. There were two places which I habitually visited where on my first night I felt I could “hear” the silence. The first was my parents’ home in a sleepy Dublin cul de sac, and the second was the guest house of the Abbey of Clervaux. I no longer have my parents’ home to go to so my visits to the secluded monastery, with the trees all around, is particularly welcome. It is true that the need for silence at night is less urgent than in the first quarter century of my priestly life: here in Caversham I also live in a quiet cul de sac and can even risk sleeping with the bedroom window wide open. But I still relish the thought of being at Clervaux on retreat.

The word “retreat” suggests withdrawal from the business of daily life, but it also involves withdrawing into oneself so as to pray, think and review one’s life. The hope is that one emerges with one’s relationship with God in better shape, one’s understanding of how the Gospel message relates to the lives of those who look to one for spiritual inspiration and support, and with fresh energy to embrace the many challenges parish life brings to a pastor. I am acutely aware that, even though the Church authorities request that I make a priestly retreat at least every two years, it is still a luxury that most people cannot afford. The onus on me is to make it fruitful, to see to it that it represents an investment in my spiritual life and supplies the energy and inspiration to attack my ministry with even greater fervour after returning to the day job of being a PP. Withdrawal from the parish setting for the inside of a week involves distancing oneself from the day-to-day preoccupations but not from the community and its communal and individual concerns.

For a start, this retreat provides me with the tranquillity to reflect on the lessons my parish community have taught me: there is a wave-length on which the gospel message needs to be transmitted, there is a liturgical style which respects the Church’s tradition and is tailored to meet the needs and customs of a particular community, there is a way of seeing to it that our children are instructed in the faith, involved in the worship of the congregation and are safeguarded against all harm. There are reservoirs of goodness in the community as yet untapped, there are concerns – political, social, ideological and religious – which our homiletic approach may not be addressing. And there are prayers of thanksgiving, of repentance and of petition which are as yet unformulated: the hope is that the silence and recollection of retreat will enlighten the mind and unloose the tongue so that God may be acquainted with all these things.

Father Patrick