

Minister's Letter

Sister Joyce CSF, Minister General of the First Order Sisters, writes:

Dear Friends,

At a recent meeting of CSF sisters we were discussing how to live with diversity and the question that emerged from that conversation was 'How do we hold on to our own integrity when others assume we have no integrity?' We did not discover the answer. However, we recognised that it is a crucial question to try to explore when faced with the vexatious subject of living with diversity and/or difference in any area of life, for it is at the heart of community life in the context of the world in which we now live. The one thing we did discover was the different interpretations that we put on that word 'integrity'. In the Church of England we struggle with living with two 'integrities' in the sense of a principle regarding the ordination of women; in other areas it means wholeness as in the integrity of creation; for yet others it is very personal in the sense of virtue and honesty. So it can be very crushing and demoralising if I feel that another is implying I have no integrity.

This struggle has the potential to be either enriching and creative, holding apparent opposites in creative tension, or to be divisive and destructive when there is impasse and a line is crossed, a tolerable limit has been reached. As Franciscans in the First Order we try to live in creative tension between the active and contemplative aspects of our religious life. Division has already happened in some parts of the Anglican Communion over the ordination of women.

Nevertheless this does not absolve us from exploring the issues together whatever our views, for without conversation, without listening to each other, without learning from each other, without making room for changing views or even some compromise on both sides, the gap will never have a chance of being bridged. Entrenched positions get us nowhere, they just widen the gap or force division. Marcus J. Borg in his book *The Heart of Christianity* very clearly describes the sharp differences at the heart of Christianity and offers potential ways of bridging the gap. The recognition of Christian diversity, the fact that there are many ways of being Christian and that no group has cornered the market on the truth, is a first step in this process. He suggests we need to be involved in an 'unending conversation' - with the Bible, the Christian tradition and each other.

The Anglican Communion is grappling with this before our very eyes over same sex relationships, particularly in relation to the ordination of priests and bishops who are openly homosexual. This is not the first time that big issues have threatened church unity or even broken it! During the meetings of the Chapters of the First and Third Orders in Canterbury last year we gave time to discuss the issues together, to listen to each other, to read the scriptures together, to recognise our differences within SSF and the church. We recognised our common vocation as 'lesser brothers and sisters' united in faith and intention to live out our Christian discipleship in a Franciscan way. From our meetings the Ministers General of the First and Third Orders and the Abbess of the Second Order wrote a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury expressing our love and support as he appeals to Anglicans to value diversity as a core element of unity.

As an international community with members in parts of the Anglican Communion that may be split off if the struggle for the Communion to hold the divergent views together becomes too great, we are committed to that 'unending conversation', to remain united in spite of our differences.

Pax et Bonum

Joyce CSF