



The Mission of the Liberal Catholic Church

**An Address presented by
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Introduction

Before entering into what we may consider to be the mission of the Church, I think I should first give a brief outline of what the Church claims to be and what it does.

What is the purpose of the Church? The often quoted answer to this question comes from the Church's official document "Statement of Principles". In the Introduction paragraph it begins with these words: "The Liberal Catholic Church exists to forward Christ's work in the world....." (p.5) It continues later in the paragraph..... "It aims at combining Catholic forms of worship, stately ritual, deep mysticism and witness to the reality of sacramental grace with the widest measure of intellectual liberty and respect for the individual conscience." And in order to do this, the Church has a building, a team of clergy and servers for the conduct of services and the sacraments, and a congregation that worships regularly and forms the faith-community. We also claim to be part of what is described as "the mystical body of Christ".

We say that the essential Teachings and Doctrine of the Liberal Catholic Church are expressed in the official Liturgy of the Church. This is as it should be. Now in regard to its Principles, Teaching, Doctrine and Practice, these help us to determine what the mission of the Church may be.

So far, we appear to be little different, in general terms, to other Christian denomination of the Catholic and Sacramental tradition in regard to belief and practice. But it is the superstructure that we build on these foundations that makes us different, that makes us a distinctive faith community with something special to offer the world. In the LCC we offer a particular form of worship and a freedom of personal belief in regard to doctrine and scripture. This is still a radical policy. We also offer a perspective of the 2000-year history of the Christian Church, its festivals and teachings that is very hard to find in other denominations. Much of the knowledge of the Christian Church and its spiritual experiences we have retained, and much of it has also been further developed, refined or changed to reflect the new knowledge and insights of the modern person in the 20th and 21st century. Of course, some will argue that too much has been changed and others will say (as they do) that not enough has been changed!

History and Sacred Text

As we are an historical church, i.e. a church that is connected to the whole Christian Church and its history, we are directly connected to our Lord Jesus Christ who appeared on earth 2,000 years ago and ushered in the New Dispensation. He founded the Church, the *ecclesia* and we, as individuals and as a faith community, are an integral part of it.

Also, the Sacred Text we use, the Holy Bible, is an historical document. It links us (symbolically) with the beginning of the world ("In the beginning..."). It takes us step by step through the history and events associated with the people of Palestine who we know today as the Jews. The OT is full of history (amongst other things) – there are names, dates, places and events recorded, even the names of foreign rulers.

The NT continues that history – more names, places, dates and events, albeit covering a very short period of time, just a few generations. The events surrounding the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord are recorded in the NT in the context of secular history. These events, therefore, are not divorced from history, they are part of history. We can, and do, debate the accuracy of some of these things, these dates and places, but in general they hold up to close scrutiny. And as the gospels in particular are spiritual texts first and foremost, rather than historical texts or biography (in the sense of being history or biography as we use those terms today), they serve their purpose well. Of course, the LCC reminds us of the many layers that are present within the sacred text, history and parable being only two of them, and the Wisdom Teaching of the Ages helps us to unveil them in greater detail.

The Incarnation

What the OT and NT writings are showing us, according to their authors, is that God is very much involved in their history, and continues to be involved in the lives of every human being, community and nation – past, present and future. And if we accept this statement, then the events detailed in the gospels are particularly significant to us as Christians. They show, and very dramatically, the involvement of the Creator in his creation in a particular way: God became man.

The mystery of the Incarnation points to the mystery of the relationship between the Creator and his creation, between heaven and earth, between matters spiritual and matters physical, the mystery of all levels, layers and worlds of existence and their interconnectedness, and especially their link with the Source of All – God. The Incarnation also points to “the way of return”, to “unitas”, and the LCC has a lot to say about this journey.

When we look up to the heavens, when we read of the latest discoveries such as new galaxies, new forms of matter, new concepts of time and space, we feel overawed and very insignificant. We come to believe that our personal existence is of no significance at all. We may also conclude that the existence of humanity on this speck of a planet is totally insignificant, that this is all pure chance and that we certainly do not have any influence on the rest of the cosmos!

But if we believe there is a Creator, then we are significant. If we believe in a Creator, then history does have some significance, and our own involvement in history also has some relevance, but in a way that is not necessarily related directly to what is happening “out there” in the next galaxy.

If we continue this line of thought, then it is inevitable that we will come to the conclusion that there is meaning and purpose behind personal existence, and that there is more to life than this physical body of ours, living out our lives as we do on this planet called Earth.

I have gone on for a little while with these lines of thought because they help us in establishing the purpose and mission of the Church, as they are predicated on the matters I have raised and our responses to them.

I have suggested that there is much in what we believe and what we do that is common to other Catholic and Sacramental Churches. However, when we look at the whole range of beliefs and teachings, perspectives and insights of the LCC, we can say that the combination of these features is unique to this Church, even though elements of them may be found in some other denominations.

The Mission

I would like to quote from an article written recently by a Roman Catholic archbishop who has been reflecting on this same issue – the mission of the Church, and their beliefs and practices as a Catholic and Sacramental faith community.

He writes: “We believe the Incarnation was a real historical event. And we believe that event changed everything. It’s the centre and meaning of history. We believe Jesus Christ will come again in glory to usher in a kingdom that will have no end. We anticipate that kingdom in every Eucharist, when He comes to us in bread and wine. We live in joyful hope for the coming of the ‘end’ of history – when “time no longer shall be”, as the Book of Revelation says.

“Until that day (he continues), we live in an era of the Church. In a mystical unity with Christ, we make up a family of God and the Kingdom of God. And the Church we see on earth is united inseparably to the Church we can’t see in Heaven – the Communion of Saints.

(He asks) “What’s the Church for? (He answers) To continue Christ’s mission on earth, the mission of His Incarnation. The mission of love. We’re here to proclaim God’s love and the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. We’re here to make disciples of all nations.

(He continues) “In all this we have Christ’s promise that He will be with us until the end of the age. And He is, through the Holy Spirit that guards the truth of what the Church teaches. Through the Eucharist and sacraments that sustain and sanctify us on our journey in this world.

He goes on in his article to say “A lot of people don’t get these connections between the divine and the human, the spiritual and the material. And that leads to a lot of problems. We hear people all the time saying they’re upset with the Church. Or that the Church has let them down. Or that the Church has distorted Christ’s message and needs to be reformed.

“I agree with these people (he says). I’m not satisfied with the Church either. I want the Church to be more holy, I want the Church to be fearless in love, courageous in confronting evil, and eloquent in bearing witness to the Gospel in a culture of greed and despair. The demands of holiness and radical discipleship apply to everyone of us. No excuses. No exceptions.

“The Church is always going to look messy if you look at the human element. Parliament looks messy. Corporate boardrooms look messy. But remember, unlike those human institutions, the Church is also supernatural and divine.

“The whole edifice of the Church (he writes) – her structure, her teachings, her devotions and sacraments – exist to bring us into contact (with God), to transform us into the people that God has created us to be. This is no ordinary human institution.” (“Reclaiming our Mission” by Archbishop Chaput, KAIROS Catholic Journal, 22 July – 4 August 2007.)

I think the LCC would agree with that general outline, although it would perhaps express it a little differently. I have quoted from this article as I feel that we should keep ourselves up to date in regard to what other leaders are thinking, particularly in those areas that we have in common.

And so, what is the mission of the Liberal Catholic Church? It would certainly include the following:

- To bring the Good News of the Gospel to all;
- To serve Christ and His Church;
- To feed His flock with spiritual food – the sacraments;
- To be co-workers with God-in-Christ in His healing of the world and its people;
- To help to ‘divinise’ the whole of creation, to make the planet sacred once again.

I appreciate that you would make up your own list very easily.

St. John The Beloved

In recent years St. John The Beloved has issued several pamphlets that explain who we are, what we believe and what we do as a faith community. It is a start. I am not going to present this material now except to refer to one of the cards that we hand out to our visitors. It is titled “St. John The Beloved – Who are we?”

The Mission of the Church is expressed in this way:

Mission

The Church of St John The Beloved:
promotes a sense of community among its members,
proclaims the Gospel,
presents the Wisdom Teaching contained therein,
encourages worship and prayer through timeless liturgy, and
fosters a spirit of service to others.

As a Christian Catholic Church and worshipping community we:
celebrate the Eucharist and all seven sacraments,
practise and promote Gospel values,
recognise the sacred in all things, and
respond to the needs of the parish and the community in general.

As a Liberal Catholic Church we strive to demonstrate the spiritual principles of:
diversity of thought,
inclusivity of all people, and
hospitality to all.

We also have a Vision as follows:

Vision

With reliance on God-in-Christ, and guidance from the Catholic and Sacramental tradition of the Christian Church, the Church of St. John The Beloved promotes the spiritual, intellectual and moral development of its members. Within the limits of its resources, it also offers spiritual support and ministry to the wider community.

Well, I think this little card of St. John The Beloved stands up very well when reviewed in the light of the reflections contained in the Liberal Catholic and non-Liberal Catholic sources I have quoted. However, I do see this document as a work in progress. (For example, I also feel that we should include our vision of others becoming aware that they are spiritual beings, that they too are expressions or outpourings of the Eternal God in this world.) Of course, the implementation of the mission of the Church is more complex and will always be in need of review and re-presentation. Also, each of us will have a different opinion as to what is to be put into effect; each of us will have a different emphasis or focus.

When we consider the very brief outline given in this Mission and Vision, I believe that there are elements there that are unique to us, and that the combination of these features remains special to the Liberal Catholic Church.

Our mission includes what Religion is all about – healing and connectedness. This is also central to our mission: to heal the world and its peoples, and to help others make ‘connections’ – with God, with others and within themselves. Traditionally, religious institutions give answers and often impose them. These days, people want a place/organisation where they can put questions and where they are not told what to believe. Our Church is such a place, a place that encourages people to seek and question, a community that also offers some answers.

Conclusion

There is a great deal about the special and unique features of the LCC that is not included here, but this is not the purpose of this address. For further information on these I recommend you to the publications of the Church, such as its “Statements of Principles,” “Summary of Doctrine” and the Liturgy regarding its special Teachings and Practices, as well as the writings of our Church leaders.

I hope this presentation is of some assistance as you consider what may be the Mission of the Liberal Catholic Church in the 21st century.

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