



23rd Week and the Exaltation of the Cross 10 – 14 September 2023

Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour” (Romans 13)

The Apostolic journey of Pope Francis to Mongolia has generated a good deal of comment in the Church and beyond in the past week. Why did he choose to go to a country with so few Catholics? The most optimistic speak of 1,500 in the country, which itself has less than 4 million inhabitants. The clue is to be found, I think, in his prayer intention for September: *“For people living on the margins ... That they may not be overlooked by institutions and never considered of lesser importance”*. The warmth of his reception showed how much his visit was appreciated by people of all Faiths, as well as the small Catholic Community. About 40% of the population are Buddhist. I was able to catch parts of the Pope’s address to the Priests, Sisters and Pastoral Workers where he thanked them for their witness, their work to spread the Gospel. He highlighted in particular the translation of Church teaching into language their people could understand. I thought again of the Funerals I have prepared or conducted recently and the lack of knowledge and understanding out there of what our teachings are. Then I thought of “Education Sunday” which we keep this weekend (10 September) and the importance of our schools in this regard. We have our own families “on the margins” as far as Church teaching is concerned, not to mention the challenge for our Teachers to have a good grasp of the application of the Gospel to the key issues coming up in these days.

Yes there were many aspects of the Holy Father’s visit that should be noted. For example:

- Speaking in Mongolia which is sandwiched between Russia and China, he spoke of the central purpose of the Church which is to preach Christ who came to bring peace and love for all (not to interfere in the political work of nations). I thought of the words of St Paul in the Letter to the Romans for this 23rd Sunday *“Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour”*. Yes, that is the central thrust of the Lord’s life nurtured in the Eucharist and celebrated this week in the wonderful Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. China responded positively about continuing its journey of dialogue with the Vatican, but at the same time did not allow the Catholic Bishops and Faithful to go over the border into Mongolia for the Holy Father’s Visit! The Pope’s word of assurance about our central purpose as Church quoted by Colm Flynn, Commentator, still have to take hold: *“Only love satisfies our hearts’ thirst, only love heals our wounds, only love brings true joy”*

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Father Spadero on X tweeted about the Apostolic Journey to Mongolia as *“a beautiful, bold trip”* encompassing *“God’s attention to the little and peripheral”*.

- Pope Francis also reached out to the Government of Mongolia that has continued to promote human rights and peace. He lauded Mongolia’s commitment to end nuclear proliferation. He said *“Mongolia is a democratic nation that pursues a peaceful foreign policy, but also proposes to play an important role on behalf of world peace”*. The Catholic Herald reported that the Holy Father praised the Mongols’ ability *“to acknowledge the outstanding qualities of the peoples present in its immense territory and the put those qualities at the service of a common development”*.

Before meeting with the leaders of the small Catholic Community in the country – made up of eight parishes and led by the Church’s youngest Cardinal – the Holy Father had the opportunity to meet an elderly woman, Tsetsgee, who found a statue of Mary in a landfill site. She, a Buddhist, was captivated by it and took it home. Later when seriously ill, she said *“if I am alive now, it is thanks to that Lady”*. She requested to be baptised, feeling a profound bond to “that lady” whom she had discovered in the landfill. On December 8 2022 the new Cardinal enthroned the statue in the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul in Ulaanbaatar, consecrating Mongolia to the Virgin Mary. In his address Pope Francis noted he was *“pleased to discover”* this story that Mary *“wished to give a tangible sign of her gentle and calming presence by allowing a likeness of herself to be found in a landfill ... she wanted to draw close to us as to descend to the dregs of society”* The lady who discovered her, like the poorest in Mongolia, searched in such places for things she could use or sell. Now the statue has been named “Heavenly Mother” by Pope Francis and will continue to be revered in the Cathedral.

At the time the statue was found, the Mongolian Catholic Community consisted of just 14 individuals in 1975. According to latest statistics the Catholic population has grown to 1500, writes Alexey Gotovskiy of the Catholic News Agency.

On Sunday 3 September I was with a huge number of Pilgrims in Walsingham for the Dowry of Mary Pilgrimage. Many of our Ethnic Communities were there to pray and to go as Pilgrims to the site of the Holy House of the Annunciation asked for by Mary in the vision of Richeldis (1061). We were pleased to pray to Our Lady to be with us in our work of Evangelisation here at home, as well as abroad, as we celebrate the “Joy of the Gospel” on Sunday 17 September.

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