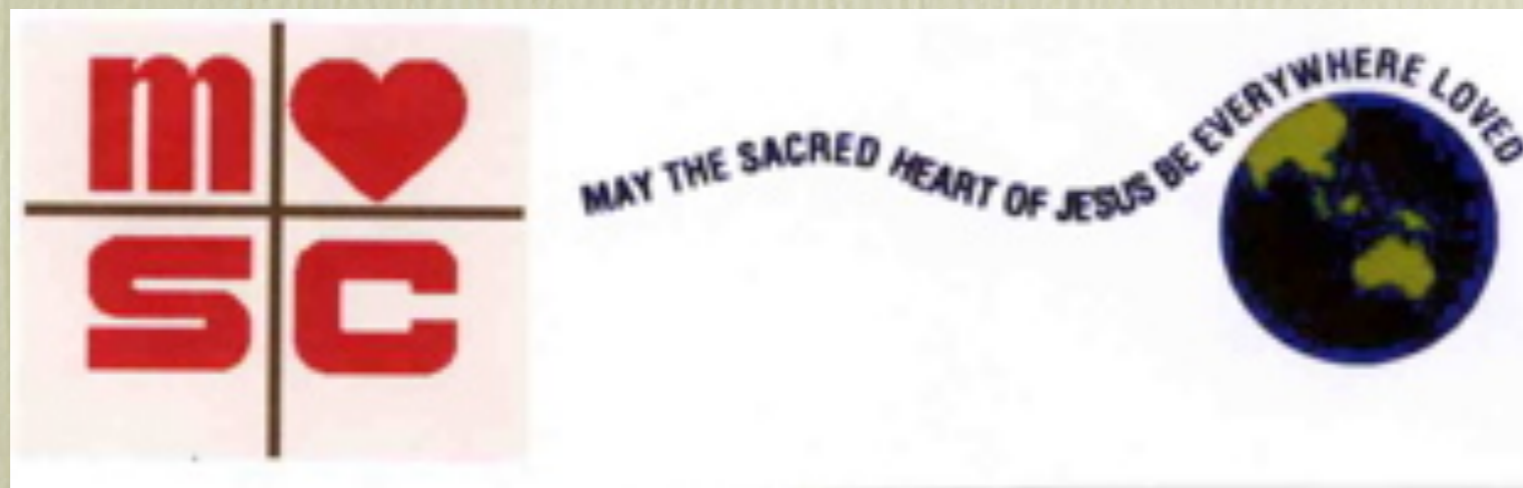


10. Priesthood in a church with a mission

Jesus wished his disciples to proclaim to everyone what he had revealed to them: 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation' (Mark 16:15).



‘The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now’ (Romans 8:22). In Jesus creation gave birth to the perfect human expression of God’s Word, and, in his heart, creation was able to respond to God in perfect love.

Jesus is ‘the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation’ (Colossians 1:15). ‘In him all things hold together’ (Colossians 1:17). ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation’ (2Corinthians 5:17). Now, ‘creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God’ (Romans 8:19). The longing of creation is that everyone will welcome the love offered to them by God in the heart of Jesus and that everyone will listen to God’s Word revealed in him and share Jesus’ Spirit, and so be drawn into perfect communion of love – the communion that is God’s own being. Then, finally, ‘God will be all in all’ (1Corinthians 15:28).

John opens the Prologue to his Gospel with the first words of the Book of Genesis: 'In the beginning'. However, before focusing on creation, he gazes outside the dimensions of time and space, and speaks of something that already 'was'; namely, God (the one Jesus calls 'Father') and God's Word (the Word that is made flesh in Jesus).

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1).

John had learned that God is love and so, outside any consideration of creation, God does what love must do – God gives expression to God and pours the divine Being out in love. The One who is the object of this love and who exists with God, facing God and drawn into perfect communion in love, is the Divine Word.

The implications of this for our understanding of creation are immense and so it is in this context of love that John begins to speak of creation:

‘All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people’ (John 1:1-4).

Notice John's stress on the fact that 'all things' came into being through the Word. The world is not created out of nothing. It is created out of love, and outside this love 'not one thing came into being'.

John is looking at the whole of creation through the eyes and with the heart of Jesus. The purer our inner gaze and the more intimate our inner communion the more we will recognise God's presence in the world as well as God's Word (God's self-communication) coming to us in and through every creature, every event and every encounter.

Constantly aided by God's Word, especially by the Word-made-flesh, we focus on God's Spirit and so on our life in the Spirit (our 'spiritual life'), for it is the Spirit who tunes our being ever more sensitively to God's Word. When, through our communion with God's Spirit, we experience an echo of God's Word, we are vibrating to the divine harmony. We are giving ourselves over to the gravity of grace drawing us to the heart of God.

We also know that if we do not recognise in everyone we meet an expression of the divine Word and if we fail to experience in them the sacredness of the divine Spirit, we have failed to appreciate the revelation that is at the heart of Christianity.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, picks up something of this in his poem *God's Grandeur* (1887).

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin often gives expression to the sacredness of our encounter with creation: 'By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. 'In God we live'. As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it' (The Divine Milieu, 1926, page 89).

It is of the utmost importance that anyone called to the privilege of ministering to another realises that it is not we who bring God to anyone. God is already holding everyone in existence and sustaining them in love. There really is 'the dearest freshness deep down things'. It is true that we do not always recognise the presence of God in our lives. We need each other's love to help us do this and God uses our love to draw people close to the mystery of love that is being enacted in everyone's life.

For this to happen, however, we must be aware of the sacred ground on which we are walking whenever we enter another person's life. If we experience this religious respect; if we listen humbly and sensitively to others, we may be able, in love, to reflect back to each other the wonderful mystery that is happening in our lives and so assist each other to respond in love.

Let us listen, once more, to Teilhard: 'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire' (*The Evolution of Chastity*, 1934, page 86).

After speaking of the presence of God's Word in creation, John goes on to speak of God's self-revelation through God's Word, to 'everyone' (1:9). Paul assures us, 'God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4).

Since God is present in everything that we experience, the depth and intimacy of our communion with God depends on the depth and intimacy of our communion with the world to which we belong. Of special importance is our communion in love with those who have given themselves over to the attraction of grace and allowed God to permeate their being.

It is not for us to limit the ways in which God chooses to be revealed. Since God is transcendent, the revelation remains mysterious. To 're-veal' is to remove a veil. The veil hiding God is not over God. It is over us. When we receive the mediated revelation of God, the veil is partly lifted, and we experience, however partially, in the people and world around us, and in the movements of our own mind and heart, some satisfaction of our longing to know and to be in love. Then God, the source and goal of our being, the one from whom we come, in whom we exist, and for whom we long, is imperfectly, but really, revealed to us.

The history of revelation is the history of human response to the mystery of God's Word and God's Spirit. It is the coming together of the free divine initiative (grace), and the human insight into and response to this initiative. Revelation occurs when we realise and embrace the graced reality of nature, when we recognise that 'the earth is filled with the glory of God' (Isaiah 6:3). From the beginning of human history and all over the world, God has been holding in love all whom God has made and has been inspiring them to respond to this love.

John's over-all picture of human response sounds a tragic note: 'the world did not recognise God's Word' (1:10). He goes on to qualify this, for there have always been those who welcomed God's offer of love and who responded. 'To all who received him he gave power to become children of God' (1:12).

Every mother who loves her child is responding to God's love. Every person who gives himself or herself generously to another is 'born of God' (1:13).

John includes his own people, the people of Israel in his criticism of those who did not recognise God's Word: 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (1:11), but here, too, there were always those who listened to God's word and were faithful to the covenant.

In the history of humankind, people have always looked towards those whose lives have been particularly free from the distractions that lead to sin and whose religious sensitivity led them to an attractive wisdom. Every people has its saints, its wise men and women who have been especially sensitive in listening to God's Word and in responding to the inspiration of God's Spirit. In every culture and in every age there have been those who have responded creatively and often heroically to this inspiration, living lives that have mediated God in a wonderful way to others. They have been a 'word of God' to their contemporaries, connecting them in a remarkable way with life, and so to God. If we see people with Jesus' eyes and with Jesus' heart, we will see how sacred is the intimate presence of God to all creatures and we will be respectful before the varied ways in which human beings conceive of the truth and respond to love.

As disciples of Jesus we have something immensely precious to offer. John's prologue reaches its climax when he announces that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received' (1:14,16).

When we examine the various religious movements in the world, we come up against obvious distortions and projections. We observe human needs being projected and human pathology attempting to find an escape. However, for all these imperfections, at the heart of religion there is this constant attempt to respond to the attraction of the divine.

Justin *Second Apologia*, c.160AD

‘Whatever lawyers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. Whatever things were rightly said among people are the property of us Christians. For next to God we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God. The Word became human for our sakes, so that, sharing in our sufferings, he might also bring us healing. For all the writers were able to see realities in an obscure way through the sowing of the Word implanted in them. But the seed and the imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing, and quite another is the thing itself of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from him.’

Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* IV, 33.15 c.180AD

‘He who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God (although the Word has but now been manifested to us) and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God (although the Spirit has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times) will know that the Son of God descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race simply as such, from whom those who believe God and follow God’s Word receive that salvation which flows from him.’

Irenaeus writes: ‘God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation’ (AH IV,14,2).

Paul VI Evangelisation in the Modern Word, 1975, n. 53

‘The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable seeds of the Word and can constitute a true preparation for the Gospel.’

John-Paul II Mission of the Redeemer (1990)

‘The first stages of the Kingdom of God can also be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live ‘Gospel values’ and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills’ (n.20)

‘The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the ‘seeds of the Word’, to be found in human initiatives - including religious ones - and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God himself’ (n.28).

‘It is the Spirit who sows the ‘seeds of the Word’ present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ’ (n.28).

‘We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart’ (MR n.29).

‘The Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. This mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; it imposes nothing. The Church respects individuals and cultures and honours the sanctuary of conscience’ (n.39).

‘God calls all peoples. God is present in many ways, not only in individuals but in peoples through spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors’ (n.55).

‘Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit’ (n.56).

We can learn about God from every good man and woman and from all that is noble, beautiful and true in all the cultures of our world (see Philippians 4:8). As we enter into loving dialogue – and this is especially important when we are ministering to the sick and vulnerable – let us pray that we are sacrament to each other of the Word made flesh, for it is he who promised: ‘When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself’ (John 12:32). It is he, we believe, who will bring to its full flowering all that is true in our unique, personal responses to God.

A genuine religious sentiment cannot be sectarian. There is only one God. Everything and everybody is interconnected. We all belong, for we are all expressions of the one Source of all.

While recognising God's self-communication throughout the whole of the created universe and the value of the response found in the various religions of the world, it is the conviction of Christianity that God's self-communication and the response to it reached its perfect human form in Jesus of Nazareth. Every created thing is an expression of God's Word, but Jesus is God's focal Word, revealing without distortion, in his person and in his teaching, who God really is: a God of love. He also showed us how to respond to God in love.

'In Christ the whole fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:14).

'Christ is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3).

While sharing in God's own respect for the genuine response to God of every person and of all cultures, Christians enjoy the immense privilege of knowing Jesus. Reflection on the life and significance of Jesus has been for Christians the richest source for their reflections on the meaning of God, and so for their reflections on the meaning of human experience.

The goal of our lives is communion in love with God. Christians have discovered that the way to the communion of love for which we are created is through Jesus. They have found in Jesus the way to connect with their deepest yearnings, and the way to connect them with God. Jesus lives this communion. He reveals the life-giving truth of God's love and, through the gift of his own life, he enables us to share this divine communion.

John-Paul II *The Redeemer of Humankind*, n. 275

‘The Church’s fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct the gaze of human beings, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity, towards the mystery of Christ.’

John-Paul II *Mission of the Redeemer*, n.5

‘In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. God has revealed to humankind who he is. This definitive self-revelation of God is the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature. The Church cannot do otherwise than proclaim the Gospel, that is, the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about himself.’

Who are called to come to God? The answer to this question is clearly 'Everyone'. Paul writes: 'God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). He also writes: 'The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all' (Titus 2:11). 'As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's righteous living leads to acquittal and life for all' (Romans 5:18). 'God has assigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all' (Romans 11:32). This conviction is at the heart of Paul's belief that the gospel is to be preached to 'every creature under heaven' (Colossians 1:23).

Paul is echoing the words of Jesus: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32). The essence of the Gospel is that God is indeed the Creator of every person conceived into this world, and that God's love for each is unconditional and complete. It is obvious from everything Jesus did and said that God intends to draw everyone into divine communion.

How does God intend to draw everyone to God? It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now that Jesus has been raised to fullness of life by God, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus – the Spirit which binds him in love to the Father – that fills all things, giving life to all who open their hearts to this Spirit.

It is the belief of Christians that when we respond to God's invitation to live in divine communion, we are drawn to share the life, the prayer-communion of Jesus himself. It is God who transforms us by drawing us into ever more intimate communion. Transforming union happens as we allow ourselves to be drawn into divine communion by Jesus' own Spirit of Love. Paul writes: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

To the Samaritan woman Jesus promised: 'The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). On a later occasion Jesus promised that rivers of life-giving water would flow from the heart of those who believed in him. John adds the following comment: 'Jesus was speaking of the Spirit which those who believe in him were to receive' (John 7:38-39). At the last supper we hear Jesus say: 'If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you' (John 14:23). 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:21,26).

The Church

The sacrament of the Spirit of Jesus' love, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church. It is in a special way in and through the church that God speaks God's Word and communicates himself to the world. Paul writes: 'God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure which God set forth in Christ as God's providential design for the fullness of time, to put all things under Christ as head ... God has made him head over all things for **the Church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all things completely, everywhere**' (Ephesians 1:9-10, 22-23).

Those who shared Jesus' Spirit shared his commitment to all people. From the beginning, the church was called 'catholic' for the very reason that it was committed to universality. The church's mission is to carry on the mission of Jesus from whose love no one is excluded, and, as Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the first years of the second century: 'Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church' (Epistle to Smyrna 8.2).

The Christian partakes in the paschal mystery, becomes like Christ in his death and will encounter the resurrection fortified with hope. Nor does this hold only for those who consciously believe in Christ. It holds for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an invisible fashion. Christ died for everybody, everybody's ultimate vocation is the same, divine vocation; then we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers everybody the possibility of sharing in some way known to God in this paschal mystery' (Vatican II G&S, n.22).

The mission of the Christian Church is to be the instrument of Jesus for drawing everyone to the fullness of his life. Christians are to grow to be able to say: 'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). We are to be the face and the heart of Jesus in the world. We are to mediate his grace and draw everyone to the fullness of life in him and the assurance of salvation that comes with living his life. The Church is to be a seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race' (Catechism 781).

The following quotations from Pope John-Paul II, stress the missionary nature of the Christian community and the privileged role of the priest in the church's witness to the world.

‘The spiritual life of the priest should be profoundly marked by a missionary zeal and dynamism. In the exercise of their ministry and the witness of their lives, priests have the duty to form the community entrusted to them as a truly missionary community’ (PDV, n.32).

‘Peoples everywhere, open the doors to Christ! His Gospel in no way detracts from human freedom, from the respect that is owed to every culture and to whatever is good in each religion’ (MR, n.3).

‘Everyone is searching for the Good News, albeit at times in a confused way, and all have a right to know the value of this gift and to approach it freely’ (MR, n.II).

‘Missionary activity to those who do not know Christ has only one purpose: to serve men and women by revealing to them the love of God shown forth in Jesus Christ’ (MR, n.2).

‘Working for the Kingdom of God means acknowledging and promoting God’s activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. The Kingdom of God is the manifestation and realisation of God’s plan of salvation in all its fullness’ (MR, n.15).

‘The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion which exists between the Father and the Son’ (MR, n.23).

‘Missionary dynamism is not born of the will of those who decide to become propagators of their faith. It is born of the Spirit and it progresses through faith in God’s love’ (MR, n.44).

‘Through the action of the Holy Spirit the Good News takes shape in human minds and hearts and extends through history. In all of this it is the Holy Spirit who gives life’ (Lord and Giver of Life, n. 42).

‘Secular’ Priesthood: Holiness through belonging

A special strength of the secular priest is precisely that he is in the world. He knows it. His experience informs his insights which in turn contribute to pastoral decisions that are informed by his belonging to people in their everyday lives. This ‘unspectacular matter-of-factness’ (Tony Philpot), this ‘street-wise’ quality of his ministry and life is the seed-bed for special redemptive love.

Congregation for the Clergy: Priest in the third millennium

‘In our times, as always in the Church, heralds of the Gospel are needed who are expert in humanity, profoundly knowing the heart of contemporary man, who share his joys and hopes, his fears and sorrows, and at the same time who are contemplatives, in love with God.’

For such a calling to be truly graced, the priest’s experience, insight and decisions must be informed by his intimate communion with Christ.



*Christ Has No Body Now
But Yours*

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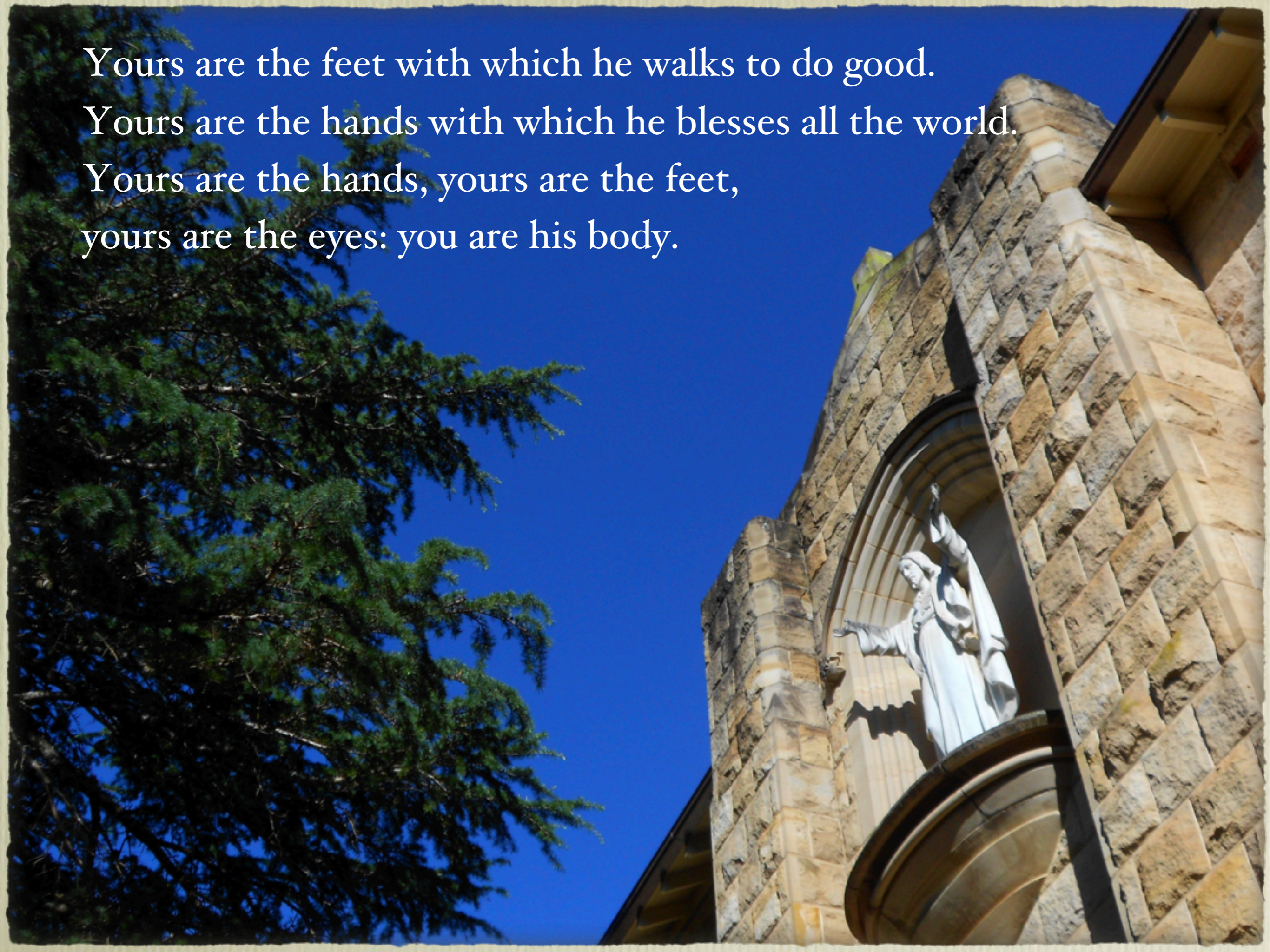
Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now but yours.



Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now but yours.



Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
yours are the eyes: you are his body.





Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now but yours.