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A Bishop's Relation to the Universal Church and to His Fellow Bishops

Cardinal George Basil **Hume**

Cardinal Hume to U.S. Bishops

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"With a divided church, how should a bishops' conference behave?" The question was raised June 18 in a previously videotaped posthumous address by **Cardinal** George Basil **Hume** of Westminster, England, to the U.S. bishops, who were meeting in Tucson, Ariz. Hume, 76, died of cancer in London June 17. "It is, perhaps, a serious failure on the part of a bishops' conference if it simply reflects the divisions that might well exist within the Catholic body," **Hume** said. His address was played in Tucson at the start of a retreat-style assembly of the bishops June 18-22. **Hume** spoke of the bishop's relationship to the universal church, his fellow bishops and the local church. He also described some personal experiences as a bishop involving different people expressing diverse concerns - experiences that made him "realize how complex is the range of issues facing a bishop today." A proposal also was offered by **Hume**, who said, "I have long thought it would be good if the pope were to call together all the presidents of the [bishops'] conferences of the world every two years or so, so that he could hear directly their collective advice." **Hume** said that "the power of the bishop is in no way diminished by the supreme universal power of the pope, but is in fact defended, upheld and strengthened by it." He commented that Pope John Paul II's "personal interest and support of us as individual bishops have been an outstanding feature of his pontificate." **Hume** said: "The council did not cast the pope and bishops in the roles of chief executive and branch managers nor did it see the pope as simply the first among equals. It stressed papal primacy and collegiality. The challenge for today is for these two to live side by side." **Hume** discussed the Roman Curia, subsidiarity in the church and the 1998 "motu proprio" on bishops' conferences titled "Apostolos Suos" (Origins, Vol. 28, pp. 152ff in the July 30, 1998, edition). **Hume's** text follows.

I would like to begin by referring to two texts. One, which always inspires and challenges me, comes from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium: "Bishops rule the particular churches entrusted to them as vicars and legates of Christ.... They are not to be thought of as vicars of the Roman pontiffs because the power which they wield is their own property" (No. 27). Nonetheless, this is without prejudice to the status and role of the supreme pontiff of the church. I have no problem with that.

The second text comes from the lineamenta for the synod on the bishop for the year 2000, which states: "The bishops receive this threefold office [of teaching, sanctifying and governing] through episcopal ordination and exercise it in the person and name of Christ, thus discharging in notable and visible form the role of Christ as teacher, pontiff and pastor. By means of the bishops' exalted ministry, Christ is made present in the midst of believers. Through the bishops Christ preaches the word of God; Christ administers the sacraments of faith; Christ guides and sets in order the people of the New Testament as it makes its way toward eternal blessedness" (No. 50).

These two texts provide a foundation for any reflection on the role of a bishops today. They give us matter for silent prayer as we raise our hearts in gratitude for so great a gift, while also acknowledging, in my case at any rate, a tinge of shame for having been less than adequate in the discharging of my duty. These words constitute a personal challenge to every bishop. When I stop to reflect on the great dignity that is ours as bishops and think about what is expected of me, I am quite likely to have a moment of panic. I then go to look for consolation in St. Matthew's Gospel, the passage referring to that unlikely candidate, Levi, the tax collector. I also read the first chapter of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he writes about God choosing the weak of this world to confound the strong, choosing the things that are not to bring to naught the things that are. Then I feel better.

When you met at Collegeville, Minn., in 1982, the theme was "Prayer and Reflection on Episcopal Ministry." At that gathering there were many good interventions which are relevant to us today. I recall in particular one from **Cardinal** Dearden titled "Collegial Sharing in Ministry." He emphasized what is in fact our theme today, the twofold relationship of the bishops within the college of bishops and with his neighbors in a nation or region. He reminded us of the words of Lumen Gentium: "The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in their role as teachers and pastors, and in it the apostolic college is perpetuated. Together with their head, the supreme pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme and full authority over the universal church; but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman pontiff" (Lumen Gentium, 22).

Cardinal Dearden then commented: "It is too easy - and theologically incorrect - for a bishop to feel that his duties focus entirely on the church community given to his care. It is a subtle kind of self-deceit to hide behind the press of local responsibilities and to ignore one's role as a member of the college of bishops to the universal church."

When I became a bishop some 23 years ago, there were plenty of people around to give me advice. "Forget national matters; just concentrate on being a diocesan bishop," some said. "Leave the running of the diocese to others, concentrate on national affairs," others would suggest. You'll appreciate that an archbishop of Westminster, because he is in the capital, is inevitably drawn into national affairs and thus always in danger of neglecting his diocese. I am no different from each one of you. It is impossible not to be part of the local community where we minister. Indeed, we have to be, and for the sake of the Gospel.

The decree concerning the pastoral office of bishops (Christus Dominus) was very clear about what our priorities should be. A bishop, I read in this document, "should be with his people as one who serves, as a good shepherd who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him.... His priests, who assume a part of his duties and concerns and who are ceaselessly devoted to their work, should be the objects of his particular affection. He should regard them as sons and friends. He should always be ready to listen to them and cultivate an atmosphere of easy familiarity with them, thus facilitating the pastoral work of the entire diocese" (No. 16). I do not think there is one of us who would question that our first priorities must be our priests and people.

But we are also part of a broader picture, the college of bishops. We enter that college through sacramental ordination. In the third century Hippolytus pointed out that the presence of the co-consecrators is evidence that through episcopal ordination we are joined to that body - that college which they represent.

The church tells us that our membership of this college of bishops is in fact anterior to our taking possession of a particular church. In the apostolic letter *Apostolos Suos* on the theological and juridical nature of episcopal conferences issued by Pope John Paul II in May 1998, we read: "The college of bishops is not to be understood as the aggregate of the bishops who govern the particular churches nor as the result of their communion; rather, as an essential element of the universal church [the college of bishops] is a reality which precedes the office of being the head of a particular church" (No. 12). We are successors of the apostles collectively, therefore, before being appointed to govern a particular church.

This understanding of the universal character of episcopal ordination is further underlined in the same document when it describes the relationship between the universal church and particular churches. The apostolic letter states, "The universal church cannot be conceived as the sum of the particular churches or as a federation of particular churches" (No. 12). But the universal church "is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular church" (*ibid.*). The universal church is prior to the particular church, which is in fact its realization in a specific place.

Since we are members of the college of bishops before being head of a particular church, we have a degree of collective responsibility within and for the universal church. Each bishop, as *Lumen Gentium*, No. 23 states, "as a member of the episcopal college and a legitimate successor of the apostles, is obliged by Christ's decree and command to be solicitous for the entire church." This raises the question of how this responsibility is exercised and the nature of collegiality. Let me say first that the recent apostolic letter to which I have referred, *Apostolos Suos*, has helpfully clarified one aspect of this question regarding effective collegiality. It states that it is only when assembled with the supreme pontiff in a general council or when exercising its ordinary magisterium that the college of bishops can be said to be an expression of effective collegiality (*cf.* No. 9).

The Second Vatican Council was a clear example of collegiality in action, and it had much to say about the relationship between the pope and the college of bishops. The council did not cast the pope and bishops in the roles of chief executive and branch managers nor did it see the pope as simply the first among equals. It stressed papal primacy and collegiality. The challenge for today is for these two to live side by side. Let me quote again from *Apostolos Suos*:

"Collegially, the order of bishops is, 'together with its head, the Roman pontiff, and never without this head, the subject of supreme and full power over the universal church.' As it is well known, in teaching this doctrine the Second Vatican Council likewise noted that the successor of Peter fully retains 'his power of primacy over all, pastors as well as the general faithful. For in virtue of his office, that is, as vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole church, the Roman pontiff has full, supreme and universal power over the church. And he can always exercise this power freely'" (No. 9).

We have to place this teaching side by side with the complementary teaching of the Vatican Council that stresses the link between the Petrine office and the college of bishops. In his 1997 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, the pope emphasizes this link. He says that his office cannot be separated from that mission "entrusted to the whole body of bishops," and he makes clear that "the bishop of Rome is a member of the college of bishops, and the bishops are his brothers in the ministry" (No. 95). What is at the heart of this relationship between the pope and the college of bishops is the unity of the church. In his diocese the bishop is the vicar of Christ for his people, but he also affirms the pope's universal jurisdiction.

This leads us to consider how papal authority is exercised not only in the universal church but also in particular churches. In 1992 **Cardinal** Ratzinger wrote about the universal church being "interior" to the particular church. He made it clear that papal authority is not exercised only from outside the particular churches, but also within. He said: "We must see the ministry of the successor of Peter, not only as a 'global' service, reaching each particular church from 'outside,' as it were, but as belonging already to the essence of each particular church from 'within.'... The ministry of the successor of Peter as something interior to each particular church is a necessary expression of that fundamental mutual interiority between universal church and particular church" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, May 1992 "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," 13). This corresponds to that instinct of faith in Catholics that they have a direct relationship with the pope.

This relationship between the universal church and the particular church is expressed and mediated in various ways. One of the structures to facilitate this relationship is the Roman Curia, which I notice is the focus of one of your workshops. For my part, I would like to acknowledge the help and support I have received from the Curia in many situations. But it would be naive to presume that all relationships with the Curia are ideal.

If now I proceed to sound a note of criticism, it is out of fraternal charity and a love of the church. For instance, some of us would have been surprised by the form and tone of some letters from curial offices. There are concerns about the manner of some episcopal appointments and the length of time taken to make them. Not all appointments have been satisfactory. There is often unease about the way in which theologians and their writings have been investigated. There can be a sense of frustration at not having been consulted on issues which are important to us as local bishops.

In an institution such as the church, where human beings are entrusted with varying tasks, there are bound to be misunderstandings, tensions and a certain clumsiness in dealing with things on a worldwide scale. All such difficulties can be resolved by good will and common sense, but always within the context of openness and a willingness to dialogue.

This leads me to wonder about another important relationship in the church, that between the Holy Father and his Curia. It is true, of course, that members of the Curia act in the pope's name. But do they always act with his acknowledgment and agreement? I expect that you have had my experience of being quoted or had my mind interpreted. They used to say, "The abbot says ... thinks ... wants." Now it is the **cardinal** who "says ... thinks ... wants."

When an organization is very big, officials exercise greater individual power. That is why I have long thought it would be good if the pope were to call together all the presidents of the conferences of the world every two years or so, so that he could hear directly their collective advice. I see that **Cardinal** König has made the same point. I write this without prejudice, of course, to what I have already mentioned in respect of the help which I have received from members of the Curia on many occasions and, of course, without prejudice to my esteem for and dedication to the Holy Father personally.

The ecclesiology of all that has been said up to now acknowledges the fact that "it is in the name of the Lord that the diocesan bishop leads the flock entrusted to him, and he does so as the proper, ordinary and immediate pastor" (Apostolos Suos, 10). His actions within the diocese are not collegial but personal. The power of the bishop is in no way diminished by the supreme universal power of the pope, but is in fact defended, upheld and strengthened by it (Lumen Gentium, 27). Indeed, we would all agree that not only is the Holy Father well aware of the status and role of the local bishops as taught by the Second Vatican Council, but his personal interest and support of us as individual bishops have been an outstanding feature of his pontificate.

Before turning now to the question of the role of the bishops' conference, I wonder whether there is some merit in mentioning the concept of subsidiarity. Clearly this concept from the church's social teaching needs to be handled with care in the context of ecclesiology. But we have authority to do so. Pope Pius XII, in an address in 1946, repeated his predecessor's definition of subsidiarity and went on, "Such words are indeed enlightening; they apply not only to society but also to the life of the church within its hierarchical structure." The introduction to the 1983 Code of Canon Law states that "the principle of subsidiarity also belongs to the basic principle of the new canon law." As we reflect on the various levels of action and responsibility within the church (the Petrine office, the college of bishops, the national or regional bishops' conference, the local bishop in his diocese), each of these has its own role and competence. The principle of subsidiarity is a warning against a centralizing tendency which might obscure or even deny the proper freedom and dignity belonging to each level and to each individual.

The development during this century of the role of the bishops' conferences is surely a good example of subsidiarity within the life of the church. You may recall how the decree of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation of Feb. 25, 1922, instructed your predecessors that "such general gatherings [of bishops] are not to be held anymore." We have moved on from that. The extraordinary synod of 1985 acknowledged the pastoral usefulness, indeed the need, for episcopal conferences. The synod called for a study of their theological and juridical nature, and the fruit of that work was the apostolic letter *Apostolos Suos* issued in May 1998.

There we are offered a brief summary of the importance of episcopal conferences: "Following the Second Vatican Council, episcopal conferences have developed significantly and have become the preferred means for the bishops of a country or a specific territory to exchange views, consult with one another and cooperate in promoting the common good of the church" (Apostolos Suos, 6). The letter further states that in recent years episcopal conferences "have become a concrete, living and efficient reality throughout the world. Their importance is seen in

the fact that they effectively contribute to unity between the bishops and thus to the unity of the church, since they are a most helpful means of strengthening ecclesial communion" (ibid.). I have been struck by the fact that the norms regarding episcopal conferences contained in the letter envisage the doctrinal declarations of the conference of bishops constituting an authentic magisterium and to be published in the name of the conference on condition that what is published has been unanimously approved. This seems to indicate, to me at any rate, that the conference of bishops is more than the sum total of the individual bishops and something less than the college of bishops (cf. *Apostolos Suos*, 10).

Episcopal conferences surely constitute a genuine expression of collegiality. This collegial spirit is much more than the genteel and cheerful atmosphere of a group. It is the soul of collaboration between bishops. The source of this is to be found in the concept *communio*, reflecting the unique bond that unites a bishop to his fellow bishops in virtue of their episcopal ordination. Surely it is the collegial spirit, rooted in the gift of *communio*, that must lie at the heart of each conference.

It's not often that I find myself blundering into the finer points of ecclesiology, collegiality and episcopal status. I did this because invited to do so. But the kind Bishop Bob Lynch did suggest to me that I might speak of some personal experiences of the last 20 years or so. What I am about to tell you is not entirely remote from the academic excursus which I have just given you. But we know that in practice as bishops we are often on our own, dealing with immediate problems or trying to cope with the latest crisis. To me this is very apparent when I go to my study after breakfast each morning to open my post.

It is not easy to be faced at that point in the day with a vitriolic attack on a parish priest because he has reordered the sanctuary of his church. This first letter of the day will probably end on a note of triumph with the words, "Far less people go to Mass than used to, so you can see what your liturgical reforms have achieved." It is going to need a long answer in which I shall have to explain that an important document of the Second Vatican Council mandated us to make all kinds of change in the liturgy. Many, but by no means all, of those who write to me objecting to liturgical changes are also reacting against the council in general.

The second letter may be from someone equally angry. She wants to be ordained a priest, fully believes in women priests and maintains strongly that the matter should at least be open to debate. I ask myself whether it is ever sensible to stifle debate in the church. Personally, I have no problem with what the Holy Father has said about the ordination of women. I accept his authority obediently. I reply to the letter saying that the Holy Father has made it clear that it is not the mind of Christ that women should be ordained priests and that we have to accept the situation. I know in my heart of hearts that I will get a letter back from the lady saying that she is neither impressed nor convinced by what I have written. "Wasn't her opinion as good as anybody else's, even Rome's?" Oh dear!

Then I come to another letter, which objects very strongly to the norms issued by our conference with regard to eucharistic sharing. "Surely Jesus would not turn me away from his table?" That is a difficult argument to counter. But I answer that if the theology outlined in our conference's teaching document on eucharistic sharing, "One Bread One Body," is valid, then so are the

norms which logically follow. If the norms are to change, so must our theology of the eucharist. I just knew that this answer would cause pain and indeed anger. So far it has been a difficult start to the day!

A fourth letter, from a regular local correspondent, runs to five closely typed pages. It claims that I had overstepped the mark in my interpretation of that well-known phrase at the discretion of the local ordinary and accuses me of not being sufficiently docile to the directives of the Holy See. At the bottom of the letter was the phrase which will be familiar to many of you, namely copied to **Cardinal** Ratzinger.

The next letter looks very important, since it has come from the Vatican. One of the congregations is calling me to one of its plenary sessions. My first reaction was one of considerable irritation, to say the least. Didn't they realize they had only given me a month's notice, that my diary was already full and that I had a diocese to run? Then a different voice within me began to speak and reminded me that I, like any other bishop, have a role to play within the universal church. It didn't entirely remove my irritation, but I found my way to accepting the inevitable, and I trust not too unwillingly.

Among the pile of letters there is also one from the nuncio. It enclosed another from one of the Roman dicasteries. It was taking exception to something they had heard had taken place in the diocese. I couldn't help wondering who it was had communicated whatever had shocked the writer. I had a shrewd idea that I knew, but I must not allow annoyance with the person to get in the way of my judgment of the complaint. But what I found more annoying was that, on this occasion, it seemed a judgment had been made without first consulting the local bishop. But was it just pride that made me feel that a more tactful approach would not have made me feel I was a naughty schoolboy caught doing something unacceptable?

Then I opened the next letter. It was wishing me a happy birthday. Oh dear, I realized how old I was becoming. I'm sure somebody else should be answering these letters, but it is not for me to choose. But wouldn't it be sensible to lower the age when we are expected to retire? And would there not be merit in standing down after, say, 15 years as a diocesan bishop? Then we could happily embrace a lighter load, helping out in another way.

These experiences make me realize how complex is the range of issues facing a bishop today. One of these is how to deal with dissent, when authority tends not to be respected and moral judgments, being so subjective, are unashamedly relativist. It seems to me that it is important that a bishop should aim to keep the whole of his flock within the one fold. There will be in the flock considerable differences of opinion, mutual antagonisms and the exchange of unkind comments. This is a recipe for disaster for the Gospel. This kind of situation demands of us exceptional gifts of charity, patience and understanding.

When my predecessor as abbot died at the age of 94 - he had ruled the monastery for 24 years - in his obituary was this striking observation: "A man who bears a heavy burden, as he has done for so long, must live by the ethics of responsibility. He is the king who must keep the kingdom together rather than the prophet who can think in freedom, express his thoughts and damn the consequences." In the 1960s, bishops and superiors had to learn how to cultivate tolerance and

generosity of mind, distinguish between essentials and accidentals, and then discover what it is that would best unite a diocese or religious community. It is developing the spiritual life of the people that will enable them to transcend differences of opinion, opposition and lack of charity, and thus eventually be able to make right and sane judgments.

I am constantly being urged to suppress this group of people or that group, or drive out of the church this lot or that lot. I do not believe that this is right. I believe that as a bishop I have to try to lead people from where they are to where they never dreamt they might go. If you drive a person out of the church, you have taken a very grave responsibility on yourself.

I have often been struck by the parable of the wheat and the tares in St. Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 13). I have often been urged to uproot the tares. No, the wheat and the tares must grow together. Have you noted a remarkable passage in *Humanae Vitae*? Pope Paul VI wrote: "If, on the one hand, it is an outstanding manifestation of charity toward souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ, still, on the other hand, this must always be joined with tolerance and charity. Of this, the Lord himself in his dealing with people has left an example, for when he came, not to judge but to save the world, was he not severe toward sin but patient and abounding in mercy toward the sinner?" (No. 29).

The same point was made by Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* (No. 95).

In short, always be strict on principles but endlessly understanding of individuals.

Dealing with the above from the comfort of my own desk, I am in one sense on my own. But it is good to know and feel that I am part of a conference of bishops and member of a college, bound by that community which I spoke of earlier. Belonging to a conference and being bound by that collegial spirit which is *communio* have practical consequences.

It would be inappropriate, for example, to have communion in the hand in one diocese and not in the next, to have a particular policy on ecumenism in one diocese and a different policy in the next. Problems can arise when it is a question of a conference deciding to produce a teaching document. You will recall that in the apostolic letter, already referred to on a number of occasions, it is stated that doctrinal declarations of episcopal conferences can be published without any intervention from the authorities in Rome if they are approved unanimously. That is clearly much easier for us in England and Wales than it is for yourselves in the United States. It is easier for us to work toward a consensus than, I imagine, it would be for you.

Indeed, when recently we published our document on eucharistic sharing, "One Bread One Body," each bishop stated that he recognized in the document the faith of the church and agreed to the norms which had been proposed. It was interesting to note that one aspect of this, which surprised the media, was the unanimity of the bishops. The common witness in itself was an important sign. This does not exclude differences of opinion, which there will always be. But I suggest that without prejudice to the individual rights of a bishop, unanimity of action would seem to demand the subordination of one's own opinion for the sake of the greater good.

Is it not true that a "divided church" will result in a "divided conference"? With a divided church, how should a bishops' conference behave? **It seems to me that it would be incumbent upon the bishops to work hard for a consensus in fundamental matters of the faith, to demonstrate that**

consensus and to give a witness to the church in the wider society of the kind of self-denial that such a consensus demands. For a bishops' conference to behave in this way would indeed be prophetic. It is, perhaps, a serious failure on the part of a bishops' conference if it simply reflects the divisions that might well exist within the Catholic body.

The voice of a "divided conference" would be too weak to be heard. Some of you will recall how **Cardinal** Dearden said in 1982: "Can a conference offer a vehicle in which this witness can be made with a single voice? At times this may be difficult," he said, "but if the issue calls for it, it must be done."

A good example of this would be when confronted with issues of justice and peace, where a strong, united voice would be so essential. The church has a duty to advocate justice and cultivate peace. Pope Paul VI asked this question at the third general assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1974: "How, in fact, can one proclaim the new commandment (of charity) without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic advancement of people?" That question is still being put to us today. To forget this, the pope continued, would be to ignore the teaching of the Gospel concerning the love of our neighbor, especially when suffering and in need. This surely is a collective responsibility of all the bishops of a region or nation and must concern each one. Your conference has set us all an example on how to tackle many of the issues concerning peace, making it very clear that for the church on the threshold of the third millennium tackling issues of justice and peace is not optional.

It seems to me that the dawning of the new millennium, looming ever closer, is a time crying out more than ever for the striking witness of a single voice. We are in a rapidly changing world transformed by transport and communication. The phrase the global village is more commonplace. As bishops we must respond to this reality with a ministry that is ever more global.

Pope John Paul II himself has given us a striking example of harnessing these developments to great advantage. His is truly a universal ministry. In person he has proclaimed the Gospel message throughout the world. His visit to America earlier this year was the 85th journey abroad in his pontificate, a truly remarkable achievement. His teachings, especially recent encyclicals, have been talking points for people of all faiths and none. Through John Paul II, the distinct voice of the Catholic Church is proudly proclaimed. We would do well to follow his example as we lead the church into the new millennium.

Many people speculate about what sort of church they would like to see emerging in the 21st century. I think that each of us in this hall would have a list of things we would like to see changed or done. But I believe there is another question to be asked before we come to those lists. It is this: **What sort of people do we want to be?**

As the church makes its pilgrim way through history, it must constantly be purified and renewed. As we prepare for the Holy Year I would like to suggest that we look again at a remarkable passage in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, written by Pope Paul VI in 1975: "The world is calling for evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with as if they could see the invisible" (No. 76). Note those last words: as if they could

see the invisible. That paradox says something very important. With the eyes of faith you have to look beyond the visible things that we can see to contemplate the invisible ones that we cannot (Rom. 1:19).

Ten years later Pope John Paul II, speaking at a Council of European Episcopal Conferences symposium, said that we need heralds of the Gospel who "are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart, who can share the joys and hopes, the agonies and distress of people today but are at the same time contemplatives who have fallen in love with God." All of us in the church must become more deeply spiritual. Prayer is a priority for all of us. Today people are crying out to be taught how to pray and to be given a deeper meaning of what life is about. People are looking for spirituality. A few years ago I had to give an important talk to a large number of top professionals, company directors and the like. The topic they requested was "Spirituality and Morality." That is the need today. People want to hear about God and to hear about their relationship with him.

We want our people to walk as if they could see the invisible and to have fallen in love with God. The pilgrim people of God, journeying into the next millennium, must meet again that pilgrim coming in the opposite direction, him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, whom to see is to have seen the Father. Christ must be born afresh into our world.v