

Step by Step Along The Way (Week 7)



I am now in Leuven, about 30kms outside Brussels in Belgium. I am here with 32 others from Catholic Education in Queensland for a two week intensive on Catholic identity in Catholic schools. This is a joint project which has been undertaken between the Catholic University in Leuven and many dioceses in Australia for some years now. The project attempts to address some of the issues that diminishing church practice has upon the nature and character of our Catholic schools. There are no simple answers to all this, but at least the Leuven intensive provides a framework for understanding the effects of secularisation upon the members of our school communities.

The Catholic University of Leuven (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) is the oldest continuing Catholic university in the world. Founded in 1425, it is now Belgium's largest university. History is always complicated in this part of the world, and the university has gone through many variations: closed by the French in the 18th century, re-opened in the 19th century, bombed, burnt during two world wars, and then, in the second half of the 20th century, the university split into two autonomous universities: one French-speaking and the other Dutch-speaking. Thankfully, nothing quite as dramatic as these turns of history has happened (so far) during our stay, but let's not tempt fate.

The library of the university is a heritage library of the Belgium government. One of the highlights for me during this past week was a guided tour of the historical section of the library, where the 14th century Anjou Bible is kept. It is a beautifully and skilfully illustrated bible with remarkable medieval calligraphy. It originated from the Royal Court of Naples and is truly a masterpiece of style and design. Although almost seven centuries old, the colours are still vibrant and the gold still gleams as if it was created yesterday. It was an honour to be shown this splendid work, still in excellent condition, despite its moth-eaten pages and missing scenes which had been souvenired over time. It is a miracle that a work such as this has survived into the 21st century.

Over the next week here in Leuven, we will continue to consider simple but challenging questions, such as, "What does it mean to say that a school is Catholic today?" given the declining rate of practicing Catholics. Maybe something of our thinking can be framed by the experience of viewing the Anjou Bible. The Church carries an ancient treasure, yet it is a treasure that is unappealing to many. There is no use locking this treasure away, and keeping it as a museum relic; the treasury that makes the "Good News" good needs to be re-presented, re-formulated and re-imagined. Then, the imagery of the gospel might become vibrant again – and like the Anjou Bible – although ancient, the proclamation of the Living Jesus might be received as fresh and new and living.

Spending time in Europe is a reminder of how much of our cultural heritage is grounded in Christianity. A culture without a compass of faith is a dying culture. So these questions that we are asking about Catholic identity are, at the end of the day, not just about parishes, or schools or the Church, but also crucial questions for future of "meaning" itself within our culture.

Fr Anthony