

Step by Step along The Way (Week 8)



With the Leuven Catholic identity intensive behind me, I have now made the long turn towards home, with a few days in London and then be back in Clayfield by the end of the week (just in time to be back to celebrate First Communions next weekend). It is rather unsettling to be in London given the events of the past week, but that is what terrorism is designed to do – create anxiety and sense threat. The Australian cricketers are here in the UK, so I might just stick with them.

The Leuven experience was quite intensive. Belgium, particularly Flanders where Leuven is situated, was once a very Catholic country. Many still identify as Catholic, but church practice has declined even more sharply than in Australia, to the point where now, people under 35 years old have all but disappeared from church practice. This, of course, has an impact in many ways, but most significantly in the area of Catholic schools. The Catholic education system is quite different in Belgium from Australia, and individual schools have a greater degree of independence. As a result, many schools in Belgium are “Catholic” in name only – and even if that. Students can complete their years of schooling with little religious formation. We met some of the students in their final weeks of schooling, and as well-spoken (in Dutch, English and French!) as they were, they had little or no religious language or connections. The world of faith was a foreign world to them. While our system is different, we have no room for complacency.

There are many answers to the question of “what makes a school Catholic?” There might be quick and simplistic answers to that question, but there are no easy answers. In this week’s *Tablet* journal, there is a short reflection from Carmody Grey about her sense of being Catholic, which can help as a starting-point for this broader discussion:

I wrote in my journal the other day: “What does it mean to be Catholic?” To my surprise, the answer came instantly, though it was unpremeditated: “It means, to belong to everyone.” It means that every single person has a claim on me. I have a total stake in every human life. I am asked to make sense of, to internalise, the whole human experience. To be indifferent to no moment of the human story. As the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudiam et Spes* says: the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties, of all human beings – these are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Like Christ, we bear in our own hearts and bodies the whole of human history.

As part of our time in Belgium, we had the experience of visiting some of the war graves there. Tyne Cot is the largest Commonwealth War Cemetery anywhere in the world from any war. I was disturbed by the number of headstones that covered the earth, marking the death of those known and unknown. And that was only one side of the trenches. Who knows where the defeated enemy are buried? I felt the pain of the larger story of human folly and destruction. If being Catholic means anything, it means breaking open our isolated worlds and connecting us to a bigger, larger story, even if this story disturbs and unsettles us. Does the world today still believe in the possibility of larger stories? Larger stories beyond our own? I hope so, because there is nothing more sorrowful than isolated images of death scarring the earth. As human beings, we are made for stories, and we need grand stories of hope or we find ourselves in cycles of violence and fear. Jesus points us towards the biggest story there is. Breaking through the bleakness of dark stories that mark our human history are the bright faces of our children who are preparing to be in communion with the larger story of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist for the first time next week. Let us keep them and their families in our prayers this week, and may their joy, connect us with the great story of faith alive among us. See you next week!