

P.S.

"ONE CAN ACQUIRE everything in solitude except character". So runs a famous and rather poignant quotation. Character is formed and developed when we interact with other people. In particular, it is developed when we rub up against their nasty bits; their inadequacies and shortcomings, their frustrating habits and ever-so-slightly-annoying ways. People are easy to get on with from a distance. They are safe. But close up? Well, better not to get too close, for disappointment, at least at some level, is inevitable.

Best avoid one's brothers and sisters in the ecclesia, then, for they will only disappoint you—and the disappointment will be all the greater because you expected *more* from them because they were brothers and sisters. I speak ironically, of course. The disappointment we can feel when we judge ourselves to be 'let down' by our spiritual peers is genuine enough. But, clearly, this is no basis, whether subconsciously or otherwise, for keeping our distance. Often the issue is more to do with ourselves and the extent to which we wish to be involved in ecclesial life at large; it is not difficult to find excuses and to blame another party for maintaining a safe 'space'.

Periodically one hears of individuals, families, or even ecclesias, where the principle (one might have used the word 'mistake', or something even stronger) is carried to the extent of isolationism. I can't get on with my brothers and sisters, and I certainly can't agree with them (are those two statements more closely related than they ought to be?), so I will be a rock and an island set apart.

Of course, I wouldn't say that it was because I couldn't get on with them or that I personally disliked them; there would be a more 'legitimate' reason. But could I trust myself with the honesty to know the real reason why I had imposed such a separation? A great deal of heart-searching and integrity would be required to know this, probably more than many of us would possess.

How many times have you heard people tell of a dispute, a division within an ecclesia, or a rift or a stand-off between neighbouring ecclesias? There is always a 'reason', and yet how often does the tale end with something like, ". . . but really it was just personalities"!

"Just personalities". It would make a great title for a book. Think of the scope! Think of some of the dif-

People I can't stand

ficult personalities that you know! There's no wonder that ecclesial life can sometimes be difficult.

I recently listened to a tape about how to deal with difficult people. The authors (one a professor of psychology, the other a counsellor) proceeded by itemising some of the many and varied types of 'difficult' people that are out there: people who are calm one moment and suddenly explode the next; people who are always nay-sayers; others who are pleasant to your face and then do everything in their power to undermine you behind your back; yet others who try to blind you with science and 'knowledge' to get their way. It's amazing how many different types there are!

In every ecclesia there will be difficult people of one sort or another. Who knows, it may even be me or you (O to see ourselves as we see others!). There was the old adage that went something along the lines of, "If you ever find the perfect ecclesia, don't join it; you're sure to spoil it, and it won't be perfect for long". Ecclesias are made up of *people*, and wherever there are people there will always be the potential for trouble of one sort or another.

The question is, How do we cope with all this? For it is also true that wherever there is an ecclesia there ought to be the love of Christ and an attempt to obey his commandment that we love one another as he loved us. So there is the potential, therefore, for grace—for love, for forgiveness—to triumph over whatever human weaknesses there might be, as only the love of Christ can empower.

This, then, is a fine principle. What we have to do is to make it *live*. It must be more than a principle which is true on paper. It must come to life in our behaviour, just as Christ was the Word, and not merely a speaker of it. The cartoonist Charles Schultz once came up with this quote: "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand". It's easy to agree with him, but it isn't Christlike. First there's the principle, "I love mankind" (we might modify it to make it more appropriate for ecclesial interactions), but then there's the question of how we actually behave. And here we may not say, "It's people I can't stand". We profess to love one another, but we can't do it in a vacuum, in a monastery or on an island. We have to do it *as he loved us*. In action. By responding to real people—with all their foibles, quirks and peculiarities—in a Christlike way.

Mark Vincent