

Belonging: PFGM (2019)

In a letter at the end of 2018 to New Zealand Directors Linda and Paul Darbyshire, Archbishop Pat Dunn offered both encouragement and insight. When he was parish priest of St Mary's, Northcote, Fr Pat as he was then, introduced PFG's to the parish in February 1991, so he has long appreciated their contribution.

What he shared with Linda and Paul was that at a National Assembly for Diocesan Priests in Christchurch in September 2018, Fr James Mallon from the USA suggested that the "Christendom model" is now in a state of collapse and a new era is dawning for the Church.

Believe - Behave - Belong

Mallon said that the usual pattern of evangelisation in the Christendom model, was: *Believe - Behave - Belong* - (i.e. if you wanted to join the Church, you needed to believe what the Church teaches and behave correctly, Having done that you would be baptised and welcomed so that you fully belonged. This idea of this order of B's was first coined by an American Anabaptist professor of church history and mission, Alan Kreider

Like Kreider, Pope Francis seems to be proposing an alternative strategy for evangelisation with a revised order of priorities: *Belong – Believe – Behave* (i.e. people are made to feel welcome. As a result they will want to know what we believe and then, in God's good time, adapt their behaviour accordingly). Bishop Pat acknowledged that the Passionist Family Groups appreciated the importance of belonging "right from the very beginning".

This gives us an opportunity to reflect on how belonging is critical for PFG's in local parishes. Since we need to ensure we are actively working towards creating true belonging, it will help to consider how active Jesus was in creating a sense of belonging and the challenges he met from leading priests and elders. It will also be helpful to look briefly at how St Paul considered belonging when creating and caring for the early Christian communities. There is no need to consider all 2,000 of the Church's history, but since Bishop Pat referred to the old model of Christendom, it is worth considering its influence on church understanding of belonging today. Sadly, belonging came to find last place, after behave and believe!

Jesus and belonging

When we hear or read the activities recorded in the gospels, it is clear that Jesus was continually surrounded by people. There are over forty meals that Jesus shared with others recorded in the gospels. Sharing a meal in his culture was the ultimate sign of belonging.

The most interesting thing about those who shared belonging with Jesus, is that they included social and religious outcasts. Whenever he went to a village, the sick were brought to him for healing. *“At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them”.* (Luke 4:40). While this became the hallmark of his ministry, we have to question whether in recent times and for several centuries, ‘seeking out the lost’ was almost the reverse of common church practice.

Jesus continually spoke about the kingdom or reign of God and he continually invited people to belong to this all inclusive family. What is telling in the light of later Church practice, is that the requirements for belonging were minimal.

On one occasion as Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside, begging. When he heard the noise from a crowd, he was told that Jesus was passing by, so he began to call out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Despite being asked to be quiet, he continued to call out. Jesus stopped and asked for the man to be brought to him and he asked the man simply, *“What do you want me to do for you?”* *The blind man replied, “Lord, I want to see.”* *Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.”* (Luke 18:35-42)

What faith did this man have? His first belief was that Jesus would have mercy on him. He was not asked to recite the Nicene creed to prove his faith. His faith was in Jesus compassion and his capacity to heal him and restore his sight.

When Jesus encountered Zacchaeus, he encountered a religious outcast, He did not tell Zacchaeus to stop sinning. He just invited himself to Zacchaeus’ home for a meal. For Jesus it was usually fellowship first. Conversion often followed. Zacchaeus offered to change and Jesus said, *“Salvation has come to this house today”.* (Luke 19:9).

When Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well, he knew she had been married five times. Jesus did not refuse to talk with her or scold her. Rather, they had a lengthy theological discussion.

Eventually she left her water jar at the well and went back to town to tell the townspeople about Jesus. As a result of this he stayed with the people there for two days. This is an astounding event given the animosity between Jesus and Samaritans at the time. The gospel tells us that some of the townspeople said to the woman, "*We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.*" John 4:1-42).

This encounter highlights that people came to believe in Jesus and to belong to his 'kingdom of God', through the action of someone who might have been rejected in various periods of Christian history, because she was a sinner. Not only this, but through her, many people came to believe they were unworthy of belonging.

There are many encounters that highlight Jesus attitude of calling outsiders into his circle of belonging. For now, one other interesting story is that of the Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman because she challenged Jesus about why (according to Jewish law) she could not belong! Many Scripture scholars suggest that this encounter stretched Jesus vision to be more inclusive.

He had withdrawn into Gentile territory (near Tyre) and did not want to be recognised, but this woman heard where he was staying and begged him to heal her daughter. He argued that his message and ministry was only for the people of Israel. Her response, typical of any desperate mother was virtually, "that's fine; look after the people of Israel but I want help too, so I'll have whatever is left after you help Jewish people, so my daughter can be well again". (Mark 7: 24-30)

As we noted earlier, Jesus' response is that he praises her great faith. She is non Jewish. She is not asked to recite the ten commandments or list the major tenants of Jewish faith. She is not asked to stop sinning or to be baptised. Jesus asks nothing of her. She returned home and found her daughter healed.

It is clear that the belief Jesus acknowledged and praised was a belief in what he could do because he was God's agent. This was enough for Jesus. In the teaching of the elders, there was a connection between suffering and sin. This meant that those who suffered disease or handicap were seen as being punished by God either for their own sins or the sins of their ancestors. The leaders constantly reminded the people that this was the reason for their plight. Many of the people felt they had no hope or right to belong. Jesus taught that the last would be first, the least numbered among the greatest, the sinner loved by God. In making room for this God, one had to make room for everyone.

In this world, a Samaritan could be good; a shepherd could leave ninety-nine sheep to look for one that was lost; a father could make himself stupid by partying on the return of a worthless son. Precious seed could be thrown carelessly among thorns, on rocky ground and on pathways. It sounded stupid! But this is what Jesus implied God was like. Fellowship and belonging was open to everyone and anyone.

The way Jesus conveyed this message was to invite people to belong. What he called 'the Kingdom of God', could just as easily have been called 'A Family For All'. People could belong because they were loved by God, and because they (we) are all brothers and sisters. No one should be unwanted or not welcomed. Once people belong and experience acceptance and fellowship, their eyes can be opened to see faith in a new way. Then they can respond to the deeper call of personal moral action to serve those in need and to live with true integrity. Jesus' approach was Belong – Believe - Behave.

St Paul

In the areas where Paul took the Christian message, many people were attracted by the idea of a 'universal brotherhood and sisterhood', and many small groups formed to create a sense of belonging and to assist in charitable works. They were not 'A Family for All'. Rather, most formed around a particular interest (e.g. crafts, trades, guilds etc) so it was more like a closed family of solidarity. There was a general disenchantment with traditional religions and some people were attracted by the 'mystery' religions from the East, Others wanted a more strict adherence to tradition. There is a clear parallel to the attraction today of 'New Age' philosophies and fundamentalism.

The Jerusalem centered church had begun to include pagans and early persecution of the church there led to disciples fleeing to various cities where they started to make converts. This was the reality of the early Christian church when Paul began his missionary work. He made Syrian Antioch his base. It had a population of around 750,000.

During his first journey he had Barnabas and John Mark working with him. They sailed to what is now mainland Turkey. The main Greek speaking cities were the first places where new ideas were encountered so it was logical for Paul to establish the Gospel there and leave the new converts to take it to the surrounding countryside and smaller towns.

Paul's initial strategy was to go to the synagogues in a new town. Since it is estimated that there were 5,000,000 Jews living outside Israel at this time, and they formed 10%-15% of the population in most cities, it was natural to seek out 'one's own', through the synagogue. The cities were densely populated and privacy was minimal. This meant that that household neighbours soon heard about or saw what was happening. Paul gave attention to households as a method of conversion, and in most cases he was able to stay with 'a household'. Not surprisingly, he recommended hospitality as a primary Christian virtue

As he travelled throughout the Mediterranean, Christian communities sprang up, consolidated and multiplied. In preaching the message of Jesus that bound men and women to God he led his converts into a personal relationship with one another. For Paul, to embrace the gospel was to enter into community. Belonging was a fundamental starting point.

But first Paul had quite a battle with the 'Behaving' Jerusalem church led by James. Paul did not expect the Gentiles who found faith in Jesus to become Jews. James did! Baptism replaced circumcision for entry into the local community. James and the leaders in Jerusalem were not happy, but Paul went to Jerusalem to argue his position and his view was accepted. Had Paul's approach been defeated Christianity would have remained a sect within Judaism and would probably have disappeared. In this practical situation with people from a different culture, belonging was accepted as an introduction to belief and Christian behaviour. This approach is need for many people today, especially the young.

From Paul's writings it is clear that the early Christians met in homes, so the local churches were small. Sometimes, when a household converted, some members made this decision to convert in order to maintain 'solidarity' or belonging. This resulted in there being different levels of commitment within families and communities. Paul emphasised that the members were to become a family. He saw outsiders as potential insiders.

In Acts Chapter 16, Luke reports "After a few days in the city of Philippi we went along the river outside the gates as it was the sabbath and this was a customary place for prayer. We sat down and preached to the women who had come to the meeting. One of these women was called Lydia. She listened to us, and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying. After she and her household had been baptised she sent us an invitation: 'If you really think me a true believer in the Lord,' she said 'come and stay with us'; and she would take no refusal.

In contrast to RCIA and baptismal programmes we encourage today, Lydia was baptised after one 'session' with Paul, highlighting again, that belonging was the starting point for Paul. Lydia became the leader of the Philippi community, so we know that belief and behaving would have followed.

There are three dimensions of Paul's communities that highlight how they fitted in to the emerging communities of that era. First, they were voluntary gatherings of like-minded people. Second, they took their character from the household unit where one experienced intimacy and belonging. Third, they had a vision of universal and eternal fellowship. He did not see church gatherings as more religious in character than any other Christian activities. There is only one secular word (ecclesia) used to describe them.

Because they met in ordinary households it was easier to communicate that every part of life was 'religious' and contributes to belonging, belief and good moral behaviour. The essential underlying principle for Paul, was love. People must be allowed to contribute their gifts, but where people exercised gifts without love there was chaos and derision from outsiders. In Paul's communities there was no distinction between priest and laity since the cultic priesthood had disappeared. It was not until much later that separate terms for laity and priest began to be used and Paul did not work with a sacred/secular dichotomy.

More and more we are coming to appreciate that this division of priest and laity is most unhelpful. It has alienated many clergy from their people and exaggerated their gifts to the detriment of other gifts which the community needs. Paul's focus was: Belong – Believe – Behave

Christendom

Christendom is usually understood as the period of history of close partnership between Christianity and secular power, during which governments upheld and promoted Christianity. The era of Christendom is generally understood to have begun in the fourth century under the Emperor Constantine and survived until the Reformation and Enlightenment around 1800.

In 313 the Emperor Constantine issued an Edict tolerating Christianity and in 337 he established it as the official religion throughout his Empire. As a result religion became institutionalized, political, elitist and complex both in government and worship.

During the years that followed some Popes were often more involved in temporal welfare than spiritual concerns and they bowed to the pressure of various Emperors who often appointed bishops and chaplains. Many Popes lost all religious authority and often people's allegiance to their faith was determined by the practical protection they needed from an emperor or king.

The highpoint of Christendom was the crowning of the Emperor Charlemagne by Pope Leo 3rd in 800 CE. The Emperor protected the Pope from his enemies and allowed Rome independence from the powerful Eastern church. The Pope endorsed Charlemagne as Emperor of Western Europe.

Charlemagne had studied Latin and read St Augustine's 'City of God' and he believed that church and state should be allies in the unification of society. He acted as the divinely appointed protector of the church.

He converted the Saxons by force, appointed and deposed bishops and instituted changes to the liturgy. At one time he imposed the death penalty for the refusal of baptism.

The power of the church became a great force because it touched almost everyone's life in many important ways. Clergy baptised, performed wedding blessings and conducted burial services. Many feudal lords gave lands to the church in return for services performed by the clergy who often controlled the lords with threats of excommunication.

The Black Plague

The Black Plague occurred during this era. About 25% of Europe's population died between 1347 and 1352. In a time of great superstition and fear, such a tragic event fuelled a strong feeling of guilt and a fear of Hell. This was expressed in the paintings in churches and cathedrals. It also gave rise to penance, pilgrimages, purgatory and relics. People believed that holiness would pass on to the possessor of something a holy person had owned, so soon after such a person's death they were keen to obtain a part of their clothing or a part of their body in the hope that their holiness could assist others avoid hell.

Many were desperate to "buy" God's favour and their fear was fanned by preachers and artists. At one time, ten days out of purgatory was offered for lasting out the Mass! Collections funded projects to build cathedrals and palaces and rewards were granted in the form of indulgences.

Clericalism

In the Christendom era, the Church was powerful and clerics became a separate class from the laity. Bishops lived like princes. We are seeing a significant reaction against that at this current time. It is interesting that 51 year old German Bishop Peter Kohlgraf admitted late in 2018, "I have never experienced the human and dark side of the Church so closely as in the 16 months since I became a bishop. I came across the comment by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, 'Perhaps we are too much Church and too little Christ!'"

Much could be said about the effects of Christendom, but it is obvious that the average believer came to have little say in the Church and the combination of clerical power and church rules highlighted a reverse order from that of Jesus: This was the era of **Behave - Believe - Belong**.

Many adult Catholics separated themselves from belonging after the 'Humane Vitae' encyclical and the way church teaching was communicated. Many were not allowed to belong. They were either refused or not allowed to continue to belong because of their 'sinful state'. The most common cases were those associated with remarrige. the modern reality of marriage breakdown,

In the 3rd century, St Cyprian of Cathage declared that there is no salvation outside the church. Various extreme interpretations have been presented through the centuries to explain what this declaration means.

Outside the church – little hope

In the 6th century, St Fulgentius said, "Most firmly hold and never doubt that not only pagans, but also all Jews, all heretics, and all schismatics who finish this life outside of the Catholic Church, will go into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (St Fulgentius)

Pope Pius 9th declared, "It must be held by faith that outside the Apostolic Roman Church, no one can be saved; that this is the only ark of salvation; that he who shall not have entered therein will perish in the flood; but, on the other hand, it is necessary to hold for certain that they who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if this ignorance is invincible, will not be held guilty of this in the eyes of God".

Christendom was severely dented by the rise of nation-states, atheism and secularism and perhaps properly ended by WW1 and those modern governments who refused to uphold the teachings, customs, ethos, and practice of Christianity.

At the same time, it is obvious from our own childhood experience that Christendom lingered on. In some countries where Christianity has had a long or significant presence, there are still signs of government and church working in close partnership for each other's benefit. This was particularly highlighted in the experience of cover-up of clerical sexual abuse in Boston, USA, where in 2010, 45% of Massachusetts residents were reported to be Catholic.

Behave and Believe

While the theologians can explain the role of the Church as representative of Christ in bringing salvation to individuals, many preachers have used and still use this teaching to condemn to 'everlasting fire', those who are did not belong. Using this model, 'Belong' runs a very poor last after Behave and Believe!

The emphasis until Vatican 2 was clearly on Behave and Believe! The focus of average 'church-attending' parishioners was on attending Mass and dying 'in the state of grace'. Belonging to the parish was valued, but creating fellowship with parishioners was a low priority, so 'belonging' was often restricted to committees and associations. This imbalance grew from an understanding that to be converted to Christianity was almost exclusively about coming to believe the right things.

Belonging became an identity with citizenship that supported the Church and radical Christian behaviour was downgraded to what looked "Christian" because of ritual observance. This mentality produced Christians who believe "in" God, but lack a sense of belonging to what Vatican 2 called 'the people of God'. Their ethics and behaviour are as much shaped by the surrounding culture as by Jesus' teachings. Because of this, the drift away from the church of people who 'believe in God' should not surprise us.

An African reflection

Ivory coast theologian Fr Alain Clément Amiézi has suggested that in several African countries that the percentage of those who are confirmed after the big festivities at baptism is very low. Also, he says, "the number who are truly committed in the social and political issues on the basis of Gospel virtues is infinitesimal".

Amiézi says, "We are producing baptized people but not Christians". We provide them with the sacraments without evangelizing them."

Many new communities and fraternities can plunge Christian adults into obscurity and turn them into children. He says "Christian life is not an overcoat that one can leave at the parish door and collect again when leaving".

So today, we must integrate behaving, believing and belonging. They each have their place and together they make us mature followers of Jesus. Belonging cannot have last place is this is to occur.

Pope Francis

It is clear from the many writings, interviews and talks of Pope Francis, that he reverses the order of Christendom. He is patient in people coming to believe, and he is convinced that belief grows through encounter.

In an interview in 2013 with Anthony Spadaro SJ, Francis said, "I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. Not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Even the atheists. Everyone!'" For Francis, the Church's purpose is not to bring God to the world but simply to emphasize God's presence—already there. "He added, the church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. The church should be a "home for all" and not a "small chapel" focused on doctrine, orthodoxy and a limited agenda of moral teachings".

As Archbishop of Buenos Aires he said to his priests, "In our ecclesiastical region there are priests who don't baptize the children of single mothers because they weren't conceived in the sanctity of marriage, These are today's hypocrites. Those who clericalise the Church. Those who separate the people of God from salvation. And this poor girl who, rather than returning the child to sender, had the courage to carry it into the world, must wander from parish to parish so that it's baptized!"

He compared "this Church of 'come inside so we make decisions and announcements between ourselves and those who don't come in, don't belong," to the Pharisees of Christ's time - people who congratulate themselves while condemning all others.

In October 2013, Francis said, "God does not save us only by decree, with a law, he saves us with tenderness, he saves us with caresses, he saves us with his life given for us." In his 2018 apostolic exhortation 'Rejoice and Be Glad', Francis began by reminding us that "no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual.

Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community." Rather than presenting the hermit as the ideal Christian, he invites us to look at the ordinary holiness of our next-door neighbors, especially in the patience and persistence of their lives.

In his talk on the the Church as the Family of God, Francis said, "Remaining, living, and abiding in Jesus, calls us to find our home in His Church. The Church is not some-thing but Some –One. We are all called to live in the heart of Church for the sake of the world. From there, we are sent on a rescue mission, to bring the whole world back home".

Francis asked, "What do I do to make the Church a community in which everyone feels welcomed and understood, [in which] everyone feels the mercy and love of God who renews life? Faith is a gift and an act that affects us personally, but God calls us to live our faith together, as a family: as the Church".

On April 29th this year, British comedian, Stephen Amos said a meeting with Pope Francis lifted his burden of guilt and of not belonging, and Francis has sent this message perhaps to millions of gay believers across the world. Initially, Amos refused to see Francis, but said he would if he could ask the Pope questions. He was advised that "the Pope will answer any questions that you have".

He told Francis that being non-religious, he was looking for answers and faith. But as a gay man, I don't feel accepted."

Francis responded that placing more importance on being gay than being human is "not good". "We are all human beings and have dignity. There are people that prefer to select or discard people because of the adjective – these people don't have a human heart."

Amos was moved to tears said Francis' response was "quite magnificent and blew his mind." Clearly Francis communicated in this exchange that belonging comes before behaving.

Belonging – an aim of the PFGM

As Bishop Pat identified, the Passionist Family Groups appreciated the importance of "belonging" right from the very beginning. We know only too well that some parishes do not offer a warm welcome or a sense of belonging to new parishioners. Sometimes the parish priest is the reason for this lack of welcome and sometimes it is the fault of parishioners.

This experience is especially unfortunate for people who already feel like outsiders because of their marriage situation, lack of confidence or their ethnic background.

My grandfather confided to me when he was 88 years old that the biggest regret of his life was that he did not attend the wedding of his son to a divorcee, on the advice of his parish priest. "My son refused to talk to me for twenty years". He told me, "that was too big a price to pay for both of us". He mentioned this to me in the context of a comment that he had not seen my brother John for some time. I explained to him that John was now separated from his wife and had a new girlfriend and he did not want to embarrass his grandfather by bringing her to meet him. "Tell John", he said to me, "that any friend of his is a friend of mine". That was a wonderful gesture of belonging, so often absent in church circles.

One Sunday morning Mahatma Gandhi decided to visit a Christian church in Calcutta. He was stopped at the door by the usher and told he was not welcome as this particular church which was for high-caste Indians and whites only. He was neither high caste, nor was he white. Gandhi later declared, "I'd be a Christian if it were not for the Christians."

People can be helped to belong by a warm and open parish priest. If this is lacking, we hope that parishioners can help to welcome people and give them a sense of belonging. This can happen in a variety of ways and it always helps if there is a structure of some kind to facilitate meeting others (Sunday morning post-Mass cuppa, name tags, home visits, etc).

The Passionist Family Groups were created with the aim of helping parishioners to get to know one another and to create a sense of belonging. This needs to extend beyond individual PFG's, so that parishioners can meet more people, get connected and start to belong. It is no use blaming the parish priest or other parishioners if the PFG members are not actively reaching out to welcome others. Given the emphasis we have identified, it would be valuable to reflect on our experiences so that we can deepen our commitment to creating a strong sense of belonging not only in our existing PFG's, but in our parishes from which our PFG's live and serve the community.

In the wake of the conviction of Cardinal George Pell, Debbie Curtherbson and Barney Zwartz wrote an article, "In the Shadow of the Cardinal", published in the Sydney Morning Herald, March 2nd-3rd, 2019. In their conclusion they wrote about Peter Comensoli, Archbishop of Melbourne:

“The bishops of Australia may owe their appointments to Pell, but it will be up to them to determine how the church reconstructs its relationship with its flock. Comensoli aims to do that by placing his focus on the church community, rather than the institution.

"For the rest of my life probably, the institutional church will be on the nose in Australia. I recognise that, just as institutions generally are on the nose. I think the local community, that is where the energies need to go. And to speaking to them about life and family and how do you care for the environment, or provide outreach to the poor and the broken.

"I can't build a safe archdiocese if I'm not building safe parishes, safe schools and so on. There's no such thing as a safe archdiocese; it's the summation of all of these safe communities.

So I think that's going to be a fairly significant dimension and a point of difference. Because, just generally, bishops and archbishops in the past were concentrating on big-picture things. Maybe it's time to concentrate on smaller stuff."

Group sharing

What is one action or activity that stands out as helping you or others to belong?

How have you experienced the order of Belong, Believe, Behave, being meaningful for yourself or others in your group?

How can the PFGM improve the sense of belonging for:

- a) those who already belong?
- b) those who are half-hearted?
- c) those who are new to the parish?
- d) those who are younger?
- e) those who have never joined?

Brian Traynor CP
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