

Sunday, January 10, 2016  
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

## The Church

The Catholic Church is a unique and venerable institution that is almost 2000 years old. It is connected with almost everything good that ever has happened in Western Civilization. When the Roman Empire collapsed, the Church took over, building and maintaining roads and aqueducts, and doing the other civic tasks necessary to ensure order, security, and progress. It fostered learning and founded the first universities of Europe, garnering an intellectual reputation. It introduced new methods of spirituality and promoted the arts. It developed new forms of music, art and architecture, advancing the established concepts of beauty and culture. The Church also tended to the physical needs of the poor, setting up the social systems which later served as a model for the state-run services common in contemporary Western societies now. The Catholic Church always has been much more than just about faith. It falters, in fact, when it narrows its vision.

The Church has been a consistent agent of dialogue and diplomacy, actively engaged in efforts of unity and peace throughout the world. This clearly was the intent of Pope John Paul II who helped secure freedom for the nations of Eastern Europe and also Pope Francis who quietly negotiated a concord between Cuba and the United States. The Vatican Diplomatic Corps, like most international foreign ministries, is composed of astute and knowledgeable staff who often make a difference in moments of crisis. The Pope also has a pulpit where he can raise important issues and propose tentative solutions. Pope Francis effectively did this, writing his encyclical *Laudato, Si* just before the start of the international meeting on the environment in Paris. The Pope is an unparalleled moral leader, above politics, who acts as a conscience to the world.

The Church is also local, not just universal. No matter how wonderful and inspiring the Pope may be, it is still the local parish which represents the visible Church. It is there that Mass and the sacraments are celebrated and the faithful experience the reality of faith. If the local church is not pastoral or if the priests do not effectively preach the Gospel or generously serve the faithful, the Church will be perceived as an obstacle and people will turn away. While the diocese is theologically considered the local church, in fact it is the parish. Most people have little contact or awareness of the bishop or diocese. The parish, therefore, must exemplify all the good of the universal Church and, sometimes, even compensate for its flaws. If the parish genuinely takes care of the spiritual and physical needs of its people, it will flourish and, even better, realize the mission of Jesus himself.