**What I value about the Catholic Church**

I could echo so much of what has just been said. I also value the great diversity that we have in the Catholic Church and the passion for social justice for example. But if one word would sum up what I want to say it is “connectedness”.

This weekend I have been to Cumbria. It is not an area I know at all. On Sunday morning I went to Mass as usual. The little church was full to bursting – local parishioners as well as tourists. We sang together, listened to the word of God together, prayed together and witnessed together the miracle at the centre of the Mass – the coming of the living Christ into our midst as we received him under the appearance of bread and wine.

As I walked out of that church, I experienced again what has so often happened: my relationship to the people and the place had changed. I was no longer a stranger in a strange place. Suddenly I belonged. It is something I have experienced again and again whenever I have gone to Mass in a strange place, in a different country, in a different language I cannot understand. I feel I belong to the community. They have become family.

This very real sense of being united in a great family is what being a Catholic means to me. The source of this sense is, of course, the living Christ that we receive in the Eucharist. And this feeling of belonging is increased by the knowledge that every hour of every day, as the earth turns and the sun rises over a different land, Mass is being said somewhere in the world. It is a great embrace of prayer and love that encompasses the whole world and connects me to every nation. And this sense of connectedness is also what brings with it the need to be concerned for my brothers and sisters throughout the world.

I wanted to be a Catholic because in an uncertain world the Catholic Church offered me clear teaching. It offered me the wisdom of the saints and great theologians through the ages. It provided food for my intellect to chew on as well as practical guidance.

What I found was all that – yes. And I thank God for it. But I found so much more. I discovered that these great men and women could be my friends and my helpers. We believe in the Communion of Saints and life after death. These people were alive in heaven and so I could ask them to pray for me just as I could ask any one of you to pray for me.

I feel connected to the earth – to God’s creation. Not just the use of water, oil, bread and wine, but also the candles, the incense and all the other visual aids to engage my senses, all these connect earth and heaven. I love this earthy bodiliness of the Catholic Church. God created me, body as well as soul, and wants to redeem the whole of me. He comes to me through what he has created. The ordinary becomes extraordinary, the natural becomes supernatural. And at the centre is always Christ through whom all things are made and made holy.

When I became a Catholic, I did not realise that the Catholic Church is so much more than the Roman Catholic Church. I entered through the Roman Catholic door and found there were many more rooms – churches we were in communion with. Some very different with different rites and practices but all different branches of the same Catholic family.

And what a joy to discover that the search for Christian unity is at the centre of what it is to be Catholic. To be Catholic means to be ecumenical. That is why I am here – to learn together, to study scripture together, to listen to each other, and, above all to pray together and for each other in our journey to become One in Christ.

Barbara Wood

28 September 2015