

Our Lady of the Bays, 13th February 2021

Pope Francis was elected on 13th March 2013. On 24th November that year he published his first major document as Pope, "Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel." He had actually already published the Encyclical "Lumen Fidei" in June of that year, but that had been partly written by Pope Benedict. However, in Lumen Fidei he signaled that proclaiming the Gospel was a priority for him and for the whole Church "I *wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come.*" With these words he signalled what the Church is about, proclaiming the Gospel. Five years later in his Message for World Mission Day in 2018 he reminded us that "*Every man and woman is a mission; that is the reason for our life on earth.*"

Evangelii Gaudium begins with the words "*The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.*" Evangelii Gaudium is a heartfelt appeal to all baptized persons to bring Christ's love to others, to be "*permanently in a state of mission.*" Francis invites us to "*recover the original freshness of the Gospel*", finding "*new avenues*" and "*new paths of creativity*", without enclosing Jesus in our "*dull categories*". There is a need for a "*pastoral and missionary conversion, which cannot leave things as they presently are*" and a

“renewal” of ecclesiastical structures to enable them to become “more mission-oriented”.

He says ***“our church doors should always be open”*** so that those who seek God ***“will not find a closed door”***; ***“nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason”***. The Eucharist ***“is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak”***. Clearly these convictions of the Holy Father have pastoral consequences that he invites us ***“to consider with prudence and boldness”***.

I am sure we have all heard that he prefers ***“a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church ... concerned with being at the centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us ... it is the fact that many of our brothers and sisters are living without ... the friendship of Jesus Christ”***.

From the beginning of his papacy, and actually well before that he has shown that he is concerned for the well-being and dignity of people....those living in the slums of Buenos Aires, the poor, migrants and refugees, he put Human Trafficking on the world stage, and did the same for refugees by visiting just a few weeks after his election the island of Lampedusa and coining the phrase ***“a culture of***

indifference.” (Lampedusa Cross). He is trying to help people to see that all such situations in our world demand a Gospel response from everyone.

Francis wants us to see ***“the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement”*** and the right of Pastors to ***“offer opinions on all that affects people’s lives”***. ***“No one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society”***.

He quotes John Paul II, who said that the Church ***“cannot and must not remain on the side-lines in the fight for justice”***. He is telling us that the option for the poor is primarily ***“a theological category”*** rather than a sociological one. Think of the Judgement scene in Chapter 25 of Matthew’s Gospel ***“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcome me”*** (Matthew 25:31-46)

He often speaks of **A Church that is poor and for the poor.** ***“As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved ... no solution will be found for this world’s problems”***. ***“I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by ... the lives of the poor!”***. He’s not just speaking of politicians, he is speaking to us. Listen to this admonition: ***“Any Church community”, if it believes it***

can forget about the poor, runs the risk of “breaking down”. We are to be signs of hope and to bring about a ***“revolution of tenderness”***.

He appeals to our Church communities not to fall prey to envy and jealousy: ***“How many wars take place within the people of God and in our different communities!”***. ***“Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?”***. He highlights the need to promote the growth of the responsibility of the laity, often kept ***“away from decision-making”*** by ***“an excessive clericalism”***. He adds that there is a need for ***“still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church”***, in particular ***“in the various settings where important decisions are made”***. ***“the legitimate rights of women are to be respected ... they cannot be lightly evaded”***. He appointed Dr Francesca Di Giovanni to a senior diplomatic role as the new undersecretary at the Secretariat of State responsible for working in Relations with other States, Sister Nathalie Becquart to the Synod of Bishops, and six women to the Council for the Economy.

He challenges us to be ***“spirit-filled evangelizers”***, who are those who are ***“fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit”*** and who have ***“the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (parrhesía) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition”***. (Parrhesia – saying something boldly and freely without leaving any doubt behind).

“Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people.”

“Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others”. He explains, “Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary”; “if I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life”.

Francis is acutely aware of the Second Vatican Councilmuch of what he says and writes about is reminding us of the first lines of Gaudium et Spes. (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World). ***“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.”*** (GeS 1) (1965) Just two weeks ago , on 2nd February he said ***“Either you are with the Church and therefore you follow the Council, and if you don't follow the Council or you interpret it in your own away, as you desire, you do not stand with the Church, The Council must not be negotiated... No.”***

“Excessive clericalism.” He has spoken of that a great deal more since he wrote Evangelii Gaudium and he maintains that “clericalism”

is at the heart of the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. His leadership meant that he called the Presidents of Bishops Conferences from all over the world to Rome in February 2019. Pope Francis made it very clear that one of his priorities is to end clericalism and empower the laity. He has been very clear, ***“To say NO to abuse is to say an empathic NO to all forms of clericalism.”*** Broadly speaking, clericalism refers to the abuse of power by any person with authority in the Church. Behind it lies a false sense of ***“entitlement,”*** an attachment to power and privilege. It encourages an obsession with ladder climbing and obedience.

Instead, Francis asks us as he asked the Bishop of Brazil in 2013 ***“can the Church today still ‘warm the hearts’ of its faithful with priests who take the time to listen to their problems.”*** He went on to say, ***“we must train ministers capable of warming people’s hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness.”*** That is very different to an attitude where bishops and priests think they are set apart and are unaccountable to anyone. We are only too well aware of the sex abuse crisis within the Church and how people have become disillusioned, angry and despairing. Francis maintains that the root of this problem is ***“clericalism”*** which he says has allowed those set apart by priestly or episcopal ordination to have privileged status and a sense of entitlement. The misuse of ***“power over”***

others is also at the centre of his call to a new spirituality of partnership with the whole of creation.

On 20th August 2018 – when there was another wave of publicity over the Sexual Abuse Crisis the Pope wrote a Letter to the **People of God**. The Letter begins with the words - quoting St **Paul** ***“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.”*** (1 Corinthians 12: 26) It is a very powerful letter in which the pain of victims and all members of the Church are acknowledged; he also acknowledges that no effort to beg pardon and seek to repair the damage done will ever be sufficient, and that every effort must be made to prevent such situations from happening again, and to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated.

The letter was addressed to The People of God, you and me. He wrote: ***“..... every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does. To see things as the Lord does, to be where the Lord wants us to be, to experience a conversion of heart in his presence. To do so, prayer and penance will help. I invite the entire holy faithful People of God to a penitential exercise of prayer and fasting, following the Lord’s command. This can awaken our***

conscience and arouse our solidarity and commitment to a culture of care that says “never again” to every form of abuse.

You will notice that he is often speaking of conversion, and I will say a little more about that, in that letter in 2018 he wrote; “ ***It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People. Indeed, whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives. Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say “no” to abuse is to say an emphatic “no” to all forms of clericalism.***”

That letter was written to The People of God. All his documents are addressed to all of us It’s the same with AMORIS LAETITIA, EVANGELII GAUDIUM, CHRISTUS VIVIT, last year’s FRATELLI TUTTI , they are all addressed to Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Persons, and **All** The Lay Faithful.....LAUDATO SI, addressed to the world. These are your documents too, look for opportunities to

reflect, discuss, share them with others, look to see how you can assist other parishes to break open these powerful resources.

Francis has made his agenda abundantly clear. He wants an inclusive church that welcomes back into the fold Catholics who felt geographically, pastorally and ideologically alienated. That mission has earned him the antagonism and hostility of those who believe he is diluting the church's teaching. He is not doing that, he is asking us to walk with those who suffer and are hurt, to walk alongside them and give them hope.

Francis turned 84 last December, he has from the start of his papacy seven years ago approached the role with a certain urgency, often acknowledging his own mortality. He has now appointed over half the number of voting cardinals and more than a thousand bishops. He is reconstituting the church. He is decentralizing power from Rome to the bishops around the world, to those who are willing to work through the challenges of the modern world together with other faiths, and with no faith.

Three years ago I attended a lecture delivered by Professor Christopher Beillito of Keane University in the United States. The title of the lecture was "***Can Pope Francis achieve what he wants to achieve?***" The whole point of the lecture was that Francis, like Jesus Himself, is about personal conversion. The first words of Jesus from

St Mark's Gospel are; ***"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the Good News."*** Mark 1:15

He knows that his own life and the life of every one of us is about constant conversion, constantly turning to Jesus and trying to be more like him.

In his book ***"The Great Reformer,"*** Austen Ivereigh's biography of Pope Francis, he too argues and is convinced that conversion is ***"the deepest reform"*** and is the process Francis is trying to facilitate. Ivereigh's second book is entitled **"Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church."**

Ivereigh wanted a title that reflected the fact that the Pope was being attacked. Pope Francis agreed to the title, not because of some political battle at play, but because he has spoken several times about the Church and its ministers recognizing their woundedness, seeking forgiveness and taking a step toward conversion. ***"I've come to learn that the deepest reform is really conversion."***

Francis leads out of his own inner authority, sure of who he is before God and content to be a flawed human being, flawed but still chosen because of the goodness of God's mercy and grace. Remember the

question of the reporter, ***“Who are you”*** and his response ***“I am Jorge Bergoglio, a sinner.”*** It was a real Jesuit response. In 1975 a General Congregation of the Jesuits was held, one of the decrees to come out of the 1975 General Congregation of the Jesuits was called ***“Jesuits Today.”*** The opening sentence reads; ***“What is it to be a Jesuit? It is to know that one is a sinner yet called to be a companion of Jesus as Ignatius was.....”*** Francis has never been afraid to acknowledge that he is ***“flawed but called”*** he wants us to see that reality in our lives.

One of the most powerful things I have heard him say several times is this ***“The only authority we have is the authority of service.”*** I repeat that over and over again to myself, to our clergy and Lay Pastoral Leaders. Francis knows he came to serve. As Pope he had the authority, he could have just gone ahead and made his own decisions. But no, he chose to gather a group of cardinals to advise him, initially known as the C8. This also came out of his Jesuit background and from the Jesuit Constitutions where Ignatius had legislated that leaders ***“should have persons designated to give counsel, with whom they should consult on the matters of importance which arise.”*** (Constitutions 810). He is not afraid to consult and include others, he admits he does not have all the answers. Leaders who think they do have all the answers are often described as ***“arrogant,”*** the adjective I hear most to describe him is

“Authentic.” People follow a leader who is an authentic human being, one they know they can trust and who is in touch with life. He knows that authenticity, kindness, a smile are what speaks to the hearts of people today

“SYNODALITY” may be Francis’s greatest contribution to the Church - the process of listening to all voices, discussing and even arguing about issues, praying about them and allowing consensus to form.

I was at both sessions of the Synod on the Family 2014 and 2015. 2015 was also the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops. In a speech that day Pope Francis said **“From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council. For Blessed Paul VI, the Synod of Bishops was meant to reproduce the image of the Ecumenical Council and reflect its spirit and method.”** Twenty years later, Saint John Paul II echoed that thought when he stated that **“this instrument (Synods) might be further improved. We must continue along this path. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”**

That means working together in the Church. He challenges the Church to be realistic, authentic and seeking to unify differences. He calls the church to break free from dogmatic and ideological instincts because he wants the church to be a dynamic faith community. He says that by making itself defenceless the Church can more closely reflect the Spirit of Jesus as seen through the eyes of the first Christian communities. A Spirit that insisted on an inclusive and respectful treatment of people and who leaves a distinct sense that considering others before ourselves is the pathway for the Church.

Francis is very clear that we are in this TOGETHER. He emphasized in E. G. ***“all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.”***

He has repeatedly said that the credibility of the church is seen when we walk with our people,(Synodality) when we journey with them at whatever stage of life’s journey they are on, where we don’t judge them, but encourage and enable them to continue on their journey.....our presence, actions and companionship supports them as they try – as we all do – to Walk the Way of Jesus, Tell the Truth of Jesus and Live the Life of Jesus. He reminds us and shows us that

Jesus was not a man FOR others, he was a man WITH others. Our challenge too is to be WITH others.

I also could not say something about Francis without speaking of MERCY. Very early the analysts started saying that the word he used most was “Mercy.” He has put Mercy at ***“the heart of the pontificate, because it is the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”*** It was a brilliant initiative to proclaim the Year of Mercy and to emphasise that we are a Church of mercy. He knew at a young age that he was ***“chosen in mercy.”*** We probably all know the story of him going out one Saturday evening with his mates, he decided to go to Confession and while there his life was changed as he heard those words – ***“chosen in mercy.”*** That’s the motto he chose when he became bishop, it’s the motto he still uses today.

In announcing the Year of Mercy, he wrote.” ***We recall the poignant words of Pope St John XXIII when opening the Second Vatican Council, he indicated the path to follow “Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy, rather than taking up the arms of severity.”*** MV 4 I In the same document he expressed confidence that the Church would open its doors to the full realization of the power of Mercy in our World.... ***“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in***

mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she always shows mercy and compassionate love" MV 10

Last year Pope Francis wrote an Encyclical called "***Fratelli Tutti***" – Fratelli Tutti is a core phrase from St Francis of Assisi from when he "***addressed his sisters and brothers and proposed to them a way of life ruled by the flavour of the Gospel.***"

Pope Francis addresses all humanity as one tribe, one race, one human race, he speaks of "***an essential and often forgotten aspect of our common humanity***" and says "***we are created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love.***" The aim of this Encyclical is to "***spark a fresh way of living....***" That is a lovely phrase "***to spark a fresh way of living,***" that could easily be our phrase for this year...to spark in ourselves and one another a fresh way of living, the Gospel way, the Jesus way.

This fresh way of living is lived out through our relationships as sisters and brothers, through these relationship "***we gradually come to know ourselves.***"

Chapter One of Fratelli Tutti speaks of "***Dark Shadows Over a Closed World.***"

People disregarding the efforts to keep everyone safe by ignoring COVID rules...all over the world people doing their own thing;

A rampant individualism where the world about ME and what I can get out of it;

The disaster in the United States, principles of democracy threatened as riots took place and law was ignored.

The shadows and a closed world are not Catholic.....

In Chapter Two of Fratelli Tutti "***A Stranger on the Road***" Pope Francis recounts the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan and reminds us of the stranger on the road who is wounded and cast aside in the dark clouds of the world. He says that there are two attitudes we can take;

1. Pass by on the other side
2. Stop and be moved by pity

The parable of the Good Samaritan has to do with an age-old problem, therefore Pope Francis offers us this parable once again as a ray of light in the darkness, he reminds us that Jesus asks us not to decide who is close enough to become our neighbour, but rather that we ourselves become neighbours to ALL.

He is constantly reminding us that we cannot be indifferent to others, especially the poor and suffering, the lost and lonely, we work together to create a different culture. In the Encyclical the Pope

reminds us that we are called to expand our hearts to embrace the stranger.

The call to love could very easily be misunderstood, and it was from the very earliest days of Christianity. St Paul recognized the temptation of the earliest communities to form closed and isolated groups, he urged his disciples to abound in love ***“for one another and for all.”*** (1 Thess 3:12)

The story of the Good Samaritan reminds us ‘love does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another. For ***“love shatters the chains that keep us isolated and separate; in their place, it builds bridges. Love enables us to create one great family, where all of us can feel at home... Love exudes compassion and dignity”*** FT 62

Our parishes, colleges and schools, our family homes are called to create places of, and to be people of compassion and dignity. We are challenged to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our own nations and of the entire world, because the temptation is to ignore others, to look the other way and to pass by unaware of the reality of the situation, or to think that it doesn't matter.

We are called to rebuild our hurting world, to form communities who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject a society of exclusion, and who act instead as neighbours.

In this same chapter about “A Stranger on the Road”, Francis writes in Paragraph 77:

‘Each day offers us a new opportunity, a new possibility. We should not expect everything from those who govern us, for that would be childish. We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes. Let us take an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies. Today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people’s troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment. Like the chance traveller in the parable, we need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen. We may often find ourselves succumbing to the mentality of the violent, the blindly ambitious, those who spread mistrust and lies. Others may continue to view politics or the economy as an arena for their own power plays. For our part, let us foster what is good and place ourselves at its service.’ FT 77

In conclusion, a prayer from the end of Fratelli Tutti

A Prayer to the Creator

Lord, Father of our human family,
you created all human beings equal in dignity:
pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit
and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter,
dialogue, justice and peace.
Move us to create healthier societies
and a more dignified world,
a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war.

May our hearts be open
to all the peoples and nations of the earth.
May we recognize the goodness and beauty
that you have sown in each of us,
and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects,
and shared dreams. Amen.