

**St Brigid's Day Annual Lecture**  
**St Brigid's Derryvolgie Parish, Belfast**  
**7<sup>th</sup> February 2017**

Good evening. Thank you for this invitation to be with you this evening. My thanks to Fr Eddie O'Donnell for his kind hospitality. Thank you all for coming.

You have invited me to reflect on the Year of Mercy which ended in November. I am glad to do so and to open up the reflection into something more focused on Pope Francis himself and how I understand what he wants to achieve in and for the Church.

The Year of Mercy has certainly been extraordinary. I recall well the opening of the Door of Mercy at the Cathedral in Westminster. The congregation was huge, and a little chaotic. Everyone wanted to be part of the action. And the same occurred at the closing of the Door, with the Cathedral priests kept busy for hours hearing Confessions in all corners.

Bringing the Year of Mercy to an end, Pope Francis said: 'even if the Holy Door closes, the true door of mercy, which is the heart of Christ always remains open wide for us', adding, 'we have received mercy in order to be merciful' (Homily at Mass for the Closing of the Jubilee of Mercy, 20 November 2016).

In his Apostolic Letter 'Misericordia et Misera', he reflects on some of the blessings and challenges which this extraordinary Year has opened for us. He describes it as 'a new visitation of the Lord' (para 4). I think his reflections echo many aspects of the celebration of the Year in different dioceses around the world. My points are drawn, obviously, from our own Diocese of Westminster, with Doors of Mercy in over a dozen churches and the Cathedral; with so many initiatives in parishes and schools expressing mercy in some most creative and devotional ways; with outreach to the needy and bereft in a deeper exploration of the works of mercy and, perhaps most remarkably of all, with an upsurge in the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The list of events, initiatives, benefits and encouragements would be long. There is so much for which we must thank God, simply and sincerely. The joy of this Jubilee Year arises from our deeper realisation that mercy is the concrete action of God's love, vividly expressed in forgiveness, which transforms and changes our lives (cf paragraph 2).

In his Apostolic Letter the Holy Father presents some possible actions and priorities as a follow-up to this Year. We can ponder these and make them part of our lives. Here are some that touch us directly:

- that we pay attention every day to the emphasis on mercy in the prayers and actions of the Mass.
- that we make sure that we ask for, and celebrate, the Anointing of the Sick wherever needed because it speaks so boldly of God's mercy.
- that preaching emphasises the theme of mercy. I quote: 'A priest's preaching will be fruitful to the extent that he himself has experienced the merciful goodness of the Lord' (para 6).
- that we all strive to see the Sacrament of Reconciliation 'regain its central place' in the life of the parish (para 11) .

- that we continue and extend the practice of '24 Hours with the Lord' on the 4th Sunday of Lent. In Westminster this has been observed in just a few parishes. We will now look at having at least one in every deanery or locality (para 11).
- that we are particularly attentive to people who are going through a period in which they need a tangible expression of the consolation of the Lord (para 13).
- that we give extra attentiveness to the moment of death and preparation for that moment. Here please note the launch of a wonderful online resource by our Bishops' Conference: *The Art of Dying Well*.

One other initiative mentioned by Pope Francis is, in my mind, particularly attractive. He calls it 'Fridays of Mercy'. It is a proposal that we make time on a Friday to step out and visit a place of need, or a person in need. I will try to do this. I did so a few weeks ago. Usually by Friday evening I am feeling rather sorry for myself. But this time I went out to have supper with the guests at Bakhita House, the victims of human trafficking. It was a truly happy evening. Perhaps we could all try to make Friday a 'Friday of Mercy'. This is something we have to decide and do for ourselves. As the Pope puts it rather beautifully, works of mercy are always 'hand-crafted' (para 20).

There are just a few of my reflections. I am sure you have your own. And, if I may, I would like to thank you all for the extra efforts you made during this remarkable Year of Mercy.

At the end of his Apostolic Letter, Pope Francis speaks of 'a perennial activity of pastoral conversion and witness to mercy'. He speaks of a 'culture of mercy' to be generated in the Church.

This is his real programme. As I was reading this Letter, I was also listening to a young man talking with a group of bishops as we were engaged in preparation for the next Synod of Bishops. When asked what young people feared most today, he said one word: 'Failure'. He then went on to talk about young people's attitude to the Church's teaching on various topics, especially on sexuality. He said, quite simply, 'It has no room for failure. It is impossible for us to work with.'

This phrase 'the culture of mercy' and the words of this young man, have made me think a great deal about all that is central to this Pontificate, indeed to the entire reform Pope Francis is trying to bring about. It is important for us to understand. I want to speak about this for a few moments, as it is related directly to 'Amoris Laetitia', the Apostolic Exhortation from the Synod of Bishops on the Family (19 March 2016).

Two words appear at the heart of the Holy Father's drive to see the Church become a place of mercy and salvation: accompaniment and discernment. They are central to *Amoris Laetitia*; they are central to the Year of Mercy and he has made them central to the next Synod of Bishops on 'Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment', by which is meant the task of helping youngsters to see the way in which the call of the Gospel is to take concrete expression and shape their lives.

This passionate drive of Pope Francis arises from the conviction that the whole point of religion, of the Church founded by Christ, is to bring us to the Father, to God, through the transformation of grace. This, he insists, is God's entire project, working through creation and redemption, and

through every moment in the life of every human being. In a wonderful phrase, Pope Francis describes the world as 'God's construction site.'

That is where we are to be: attentive to the present reality, and responding to it in the perspective of a loving Heavenly Father.

This, then, is a spiritual programme. His is a radical reform of the Church, of you and me, asking us to go back to these very basic truths and learn again how to live by them and be shaped by them. I say 'go back', because the more I think on these issues the more I recognise in them the very best of much traditional teaching, pastoral wisdom and practice.

For Pope Francis, and therefore for us, reform or renewal is not an idea, or a theory, imposing itself on history, or on the Church. Reform is an accompaniment of each other - bishops with the Pope in the Synod, priests in a Council, pastoral reflection in a deanery or in a parish, the confessor in the confessional box - as we try to discern the working of God in each concrete circumstance. To play a true part in this process, to be docile to the Holy Spirit, we may often have to allow the model we had formed in our heads to be broken down.

In working out this renewal, the Pope puts before us a number of axioms. The first axiom to shape the accompaniment we offer is this: time is greater than space (Ev.G. 222-225). By this he means that we should not be trying to fill, or dominate space and shape it as we believe it ought to be shaped. Rather we must respect the speed, the timing - slow or fast - of processes of growth and change. This axiom can apply to us in many circumstances and it is so contrary to much that we are accustomed to in our hurried, busy culture. Yes, as we face a new problem or challenge, we bring our ideas to it. But we must also and always give time to respect and grow close to the reality, to attend carefully to its complexity and allow its own dynamic to become clear. This means, for example, thinking twice, or ten times, before we tweet; it means exercising some self-restraint in expressing our opinions - and certainly not shouting them. It means not rushing to separate the wheat from the tares.

There is an interesting application, or reflection on this first axiom. It has been pointed out to me that for many the first step on the road to a return to the full practice of the faith is one of being embraced by the Church, experiencing a sense of belonging. Often we might be tempted to think that true belonging comes after the necessary changes or reform of life. On the contrary, if a concrete sense of belonging is created and experienced, then the pathway of conversion can open up, with all the time that it might need. Pope Francis is a genius at creating this sense of belonging, this open space, for those who feel they are excluded.

A second axiom which lies at the heart of the Pope's vision and of the tasks of accompaniment and discernment is this: reality is more important than ideas (Ev.G. 231-233). For Pope Francis, reform is always a matter of spiritual discernment, whether in the life of the Church or in the life of the individual. Such discernment attends first of all to the realities, to the limited degrees of goodness and failure that are to be found there. We accompany one another in our slow progress towards the revealed fullness of life to which we are called. What we are looking for, in this discernment, are the shades of progress, not the black and white of a final judgment.

Neither reform of the Church, nor the pastoral care of individuals, is ever to be seen as a battle of ideas. Such is not the focus of this work. In fact, the battle of ideas, so beloved of the media, for example, tends to take us away from the very place which should fill our hearts and minds: the

respectful, even reverential regard for the reality of a person's life and how God is at work in it at this moment. The temptation which often faces us is that retreating into ideological clashes - liberal and conservative, or however they are designated - which end up giving more importance to parties and views rather than to the demands of reality and the call of God to journey to Him. They take us away, often for our comfort, from the reality before our eyes. Yet that is precisely where the Lord is to be found and where He wants us to be.

Speaking to the Bishops of the United States, the Pope has repeated this vision saying: 'I know that you face many challenges and that the field in which you sow is unyielding, and that there is always the temptation to give in to fear, to lick one's wounds, to think back on bygone times and to devise harsh responses to fierce opposition. And yet we are promoters of the culture of encounter. We are living sacraments of the embrace between God's riches and our poverty. We are witnesses of the abasement and the condescension of God who anticipates in love our every response. For this, harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing' (23 September 2015).

This challenge can be particularly hard, not least when we are up against difficult and unforgiving neighbours, colleagues or friends. Then the witness to mercy really takes root!

In understanding that reality is more important than ideas, the reality of limits, or limitations, becomes crucial. We have to take limitations seriously and work within them - not least our own. This is the wisdom of pastoral care and is the antidote to what the Pope calls, in his blunt way, the 'aggression of idealism' or 'pastoral autocracy'.

But at the same time we do not surrender to the limits of the present reality, as if there is nothing to be done except sink into the sofa. We are to be clear about where the signposts are, pointing to the path we are to try to follow, discerning the next steps and walking, as best we can, together with others who are making the journey.

A further perspective of the Pope important to the art of accompaniment and discernment is that before the mystery of God, nothing is too big and nothing is too small. So, on the one hand, we should not turn away from the radical demands of the Gospel - and its' unfolding in practice - which always seems unreasonable. But nor should we demean the smallest of steps, the smallest of gestures, which often give expression to the greatest of truths. Small steps on a road of conversion are a miracle of grace which we must truly welcome with joy. Think, too, of how many of the symbolic actions of Pope Francis, simple, human gestures, have conveyed to a watching world the inner heart of the Gospel of God's mercy. How many times do we miss the opportunity of using such simple gestures of compassion and generosity, thinking they are too insignificant to be bothered with? The wise person, parent, priest or friend, knows their effectiveness. And they cost so little.

Accompaniment and discernment are so much about limits and desires. It takes genuine humility to recognise our own limitations, letting go of the last vestiges of seeing myself as a hero and acknowledging that I stand in need, constantly, of forgiveness especially from those who love me most. You will know, I am sure, the quip about the Englishman: a self-made man who worships his creator! I think that temptation faces us all today in our culture of individualism and autonomy.

Yet we also have to embrace our deepest desires: that pervading longing to be better, the lingering hope of holiness; the marvellous moments when everything again seems possible as we glimpse, through the clouds of everyday living the bright horizon of our hopes and desires. This takes us right through to the moment of death, for which life is a trial run. Cardinal Hume expressed this lasting power of faith and hope when he described his own experience of facing death as a little like sitting in the front row of the stalls, waiting for the curtain to go up!

In these and so many other ways we are being invited to learn to give deep respect to the reality of life, to recognise the limits of the possibilities at each point. Day by day we are to seek to deepen our desire for goodness, for conversion, for closeness to the Lord. Gradually we learn how to discern the next step in response to God's mercy and see the longer and challenging pathway we are to take. This can only be done if we give time, if we are a person in tune with the Spirit through our own prayer. This is the wisdom of the reform that our Holy Father is laying before us, with persistence and patience. He is remarkable. He is our shepherd and he is to be lovingly followed.

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