

POPE FRANCIS: INNOVATION AND CONTINUITY

THERE IS A stirring throughout the Catholic Church, and it is affecting other denominations, other faiths as well, and even non-believers. And the stirring starts from Pope Francis. We can say that he is a stirrer!

From his first days as pope he started to make changes: simple things like being driven in a Ford Focus rather than a papal limousine; like joining the queue in the Vatican cafeteria; like moving out of the Apostolic Palace into a two-bedroom apartment in the Casa Santa Marta, the Vatican guest house.

Francis is the first Latin American pope, the first Jesuit pope, and the first non-European pope for many centuries, and he is certainly a different type of pope.

He announced to the international press that he wanted a church that is poor and for the poor. He went out to meet the poor on the first Holy Thursday after his election when he celebrated the Mass of the Lord's Supper in a youth prison and washed the feet of inmates, including women and Muslims.

In addition, he has captured the world's attention and approval with his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato si*.

It is a testimony to the authority of the papacy that the gestures of Pope Francis are having such an impact on the Church and beyond.

After years of scandals and other reasons for disaffection with the Church, Pope Francis has come as good news for the Church institution.

And now Pope Francis has declared this year an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. Again he strikes a different note. He presents us with a double challenge—to ask for God's mercy—and to be merciful ourselves.

Jesus is the mercy of God. He has come to

us sinners. He has pitched his tent among us, travels with us on our journey. He wants to be merciful—that is the whole reason for his coming. And God's mercy is for all peoples, for all God's children: all peoples, races and nations and creeds.

We are to accept his gift, and pray 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I have sinned'. To accept God's mercy requires that we admit our faults and repent of our sins.

'The Lord of Mercy always forgives; he always offers me the possibility of starting over. He loves me for what I am.' (Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*.)

And we are to be merciful: 'Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful.' (Lk 6.36). 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Mth 5.7)

Pope Francis stated: 'It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.' (11 April 2015)

One of the corporal works of mercy is to shelter the homeless. This gives us much to reflect upon in Australia, as we react to the way asylum seekers are being treated by our nation.

In a recent media statement Bishop Long, the Australian Catholic Bishops spokesman on refugees and a former refugee himself, urged that the Australian Government's response to people seeking asylum, including babies born in Australia and their parents, should focus on protecting them from harm and respecting their human dignity.

Bishop Long declared: 'I urge the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Minister for Immigration Peter Dutton to show compassion and mercy towards these families and not act in a way that will cause even more harm than has been done already.'

He pledged that the Catholic Church is prepared to give support to asylum seekers.

The Catholic Church opposes mandatory detention and offshore detention because these policy responses do not respect the dignity of people seeking our help.

Bishop Long stated: ‘Governments have a responsibility to manage migration flows, but the Australian Government’s current approach is harsh and should change.

This is not the first statement from the Australian bishops rejecting the policies of the government in respect to asylum seekers. It follows the Social Justice statement for 2015-2016, from the Australian Bishops Conference, *For Those Who’ve Come Across the Seas Justice for Refugees and Asylum Seekers*.

The Catholic Church in Australia has consistently been highly critical of the Australian government for its policies concerning asylum seekers. The Church is urging that we as a nation treat asylum seekers and refugees with much more mercy than we do.

As Pope Francis said in the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, par. 10: ‘The Church has an endless desire to show mercy and perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy’.

Poverty in so many parts of the world is an issue that call for us to be merciful. The first of the seven corporal works of mercy is to feed the hungry.

But we as a Church must recognise that we ourselves are in need of mercy. The crisis

of abuse by people in the Church is a clear demonstration of that need.

The emphasis on mercy by the Church in recent times has been traced back to the opening speech by Pope John XXIII at the Second Vatican Council when he said that the Council should be pastoral rather than doctrinal: ‘The substance of the ancient doctrine of the Deposit of Faith is one thing, and the way it is presented is another’.

He went on to say that the Church has in the past opposed errors regarding the faith ‘with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations’.

Pope Francis, addressing the participants in the plenary session of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation on October 14th, 2013, said:

As children of the Church we must continue on the path of Vatican Council II, stripping ourselves of useless and harmful things, of false worldly securities which weigh down the Church and damage her true face. There is need of Christians who render the mercy of God visible to the men of today, His tenderness for every creature [...] the New Evangelisation ... cannot but use the language of mercy.

Though he is a pope who makes changes, Pope Francis is very much in step with the Church’s pilgrim journey.

—**Barry Brundell MSC, Editor**

Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of 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 time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters. Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope!

—**Pope Francis, *The Face of Mercy*, par.15.**