

1. Pope Francis' pastoral emphasishope, mercy and joy.....walking the talk.

It is well known that it takes far more time to turn an ocean liner around than a small motor boat. The Roman Catholic Church is a huge organisation with centuries of tradition and that make immediate change in many areas extremely difficult. Expectations that there will be radical and rapid change under Pope Francis are very high. Francis wants change, but he has cautioned, *"Many think that changes and reforms can take place in a short time. I believe that we always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change. And this is the time of discernment. Sometimes discernment instead urges us to do precisely what you had at first thought you would do later."*

At the same time, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, is convinced that far-reaching church reform is on the way, "it will not be achieved through big words and programmes but through people like Pope Francis. It is fascinating to see how Pope Francis is encouraging, reviving and renewing the church".

Francis indicated he wanted change when he used the phrase, "Who am I to Judge?" He has said the church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. *"We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time."*

While we can expect little change in doctrinal teaching or change in areas for which some people have high hopes, we will see a pastoral emphasis that emphasises compassion, mercy and freedom from judgment and condemnation. It is important that we understand this pastoral emphasis, especially for those sharing leadership roles within the Church. In responding to a proposal that he might introduce female cardinals, Francis suggested this would only clericalise women and that women needed more significant roles. At first this might seem to indicate a refusal to change, but on closer examination, it indicates a pragmatic response leaves open the possibility of a greater role for women in making decisions and holding responsibilities in the Church.

From the time Pope Benedict resigned it became clear that there were huge problems in **the Vatican**, and Francis has appointed a permanent Council of eight Cardinals from every continent, to advise him on reform. A new Constitution is being planned to replace the 1988 constitution drawn up by John Paul 2nd. Francis has displayed his thinking and dismay about some aspects of the Vatican, *"You know what I think about this? Heads of the Church have often been narcissists, flattered and thrilled by their courtiers. The court is the leprosy of the papacy"*.

Eight officials, including four women, have been appointed to prepare the statutes and define powers and duties of a new Vatican Child Abuse Commission, to address the church's global clerical sexual abuse scandal. The women include a French psychiatrist, a British mental health specialist, a sexual abuse victim and campaigner and a former Polish prime minister. More members from other parts of the world will be appointed later. Cardinal Sean O'Malley, a Franciscan, is a member of this Commission and the Council of 8.

Francis has appointed another commission to investigate how the **Vatican Bank** operates and appointed Cardinal George Pell as head of a new Secretariat for Finance. Secular financial firms have been hired to do a third-party investigation of its practices, and recently, Francis replaced four of the five cardinals on its advisory council with a new group to oversee much-needed reforms.

He appointed sixteen **new cardinals**, nine of whom are from the southern hemisphere including Asia and some of the poorest countries in the world such as Haiti and Burkina Faso (Burkina) in Western Africa. Five are from Latin America. These appointments more accurately represent the realities of the worldwide Catholic Church than we have seen in past appointments.

Cardinal Maradiaga, the chair of the Pope's advisory Council said, *"From being a European Church, more or less culturally uniform, and hence mono-centric, the Church is on her way to become a universal Church, with multiple cultural roots and, in this sense, culturally polycentric. It is symbolic indeed that the last three Popes have not been Italian; the temptation of Europeanizing and Italianizing the Church has always been one tied to pretenses to power. Fortunately, things have changed"*.

Cardinal Raymond Burke, well known for his ornate liturgical vestments and conservative views, has been replaced by a pastoral man, Cardinal Wuerl in the powerful Congregation of Bishops which is responsible for the **appointment of new Bishops**. Francis has made it clear that Bishops are pastors, not princes. Similarly, he told officials who are judges on **church tribunals**. "You are essentially pastors. As you carry out your judicial work, do not forget that you are pastors. Behind every file, every position, every case, there are persons who wait for justice".

Pope Francis has spoken strongly about the need for **Vatican decentralization** and reform of the papacy, in line with the vision of Vatican 2, stressing that local Bishop's Conferences should have "genuine doctrinal authority". He said he has found it "amazing" to see complaints about "lack of orthodoxy" flowing into the Vatican offices in Rome from conservative Catholics around the world. They ask the Vatican to investigate or discipline their priests, bishops or nuns. Such complaints, he said, "are better dealt with locally," or else the Vatican offices risk becoming "institutions of censorship".

Francis has recognised that there are many **pastoral issues**, especially to do with the family, that need attention. He has called for a wide consultation with the laity.

The next ordinary session of the synod of bishops is set for 2015, and will be preceded by an extraordinary session in October 2014. The theme for both sessions will be the same: "The pastoral challenges concerning the family in the context of evangelization." The tasks of the two sessions will be different. In 2014 there will be a review of the new developments that have taken place in society, and "testimonies and proposals" will be gathered. In 2015 there will be an effort to set "practical guidelines for pastoral care."

The head of his advisory Council, Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga has said, *"We have the traditional doctrine, and, of course, the traditional teaching will continue, but pastoral challenges require timely answers. They can't any longer come from authoritarianism and moralism."* The cardinal has called for the leader for the Congregation of the Faith, Cardinal Muller, to *"not be so black and white, but to show some flexibility"*.

It is helpful to appreciate the vision Francis is putting forward so that we can respond to it. It is easy to see a parallel between himself and Jesus in terms of preaching truth and justice but not seeking to judge people. Luke 12:14 has Jesus using the same words Francis has become famous for, "Who am I to judge?" This was in response to a request that Jesus convince a person to share his inheritance. There was never any doubt about what Jesus stood for.

His overwhelming message was of God's love and forgiveness and he demonstrated this by his actions as much as by his words. It is this same ability to display what he stands for, that has impressed people in regard to Pope Francis. It is our mission to live our lives as authentic witnesses to what we believe.

An inclusive God for an inclusive Church

"Who am I to judge?" Pope Francis gave this answer in response to a reporter's question about the status of gay priests in the Church. More than anything else he has said, this exchange stood out as being entirely different from what has been the style of the past two men who were Pope between 1978 and 2013. Cardinal Schönborn said after the Austrian Bishops ad limina visit with Pope Francis, that he regretted that the Austrian bishops haven't dared to speak out openly on necessary church reforms in the past. "We didn't have the courage to address the need for greater decentralization and to strengthen local churches' responsibilities"

Responding to the issues the Austrian Bishops brought, including the survey results showing that ninety-five percent of those in Austria who responded, were in favour of allowing divorced and remarried Catholics to receive the sacraments. Francis said, "We cannot speak about people without speaking about families," This is why the subject of the coming Synod of Bishops in October has been altered from bioethics to the family.

Cardinal Schönborn said the Pope's basic message was "Don't judge, but look closely and listen very carefully." In his first year since being elected Pope, Francis has frequently claimed that the purpose of the Church is more to proclaim God's merciful love for all people than to condemn sinners, especially those having to do with gender and sexual orientation. In an interview with Jesuit priest Antonio Spadaro, in August 2013, Francis said "A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality," he said. "I replied with another question: 'Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?' We must always consider the person."

He continued, "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods." He told Spadaro, "I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. Not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists. Everyone!" For Francis, the Church's purpose is not to bring God to the world but simply to emphasize God's presence—already there".

In his interview an interview with La Repubblica's founder, Eugenio Scalfari, October 1st, 2013, Francis has claimed that "A Vatican-centric view neglects the *world around us. I do not share this view and I'll do everything I can to change it*".

A shift away from dogmatism

Francis told Spadaro, "The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. The church should be a "home for all" and not a "small chapel" focused on doctrine, orthodoxy and a limited agenda of moral teachings". This emphasis is a significant shift from that of the past thirty five years.

In another interview, with atheist Eugenio Scalfari in September 2013, Francis said, "*I would not speak about 'absolute' truths, even for believers. Truth is a relationship. As such, each one of us receives the truth and expresses it from within, that is to say, according to one's own circumstances, culture, and situation in life. Even the dogma of the Christian religion must proceed from these laws. It progresses, solidifying with years, growing over time. So we grow in the understanding of the truth. There are ecclesiastical rules and precepts that were once effective, but now they have lost value or meaning. The view of the Church's teaching as a monolith to defend without nuance or different understandings is wrong.*"

For those of used to a constant message of order and control, Francis' words in July 2013 tell a different story. He said to some Argentine WYD pilgrims, "*I want to tell you something. What is it that I expect as a consequence of World Youth Day? I want a mess. We knew that in Rio there would be great disorder, but I want trouble in the dioceses! I want to see the church get closer to the people.*"

I want to get rid of clericalism, the mundane, this closing ourselves off within ourselves, in our parishes, schools or structures. Because these need to get out!"

A pastoral Church

One image of the church that Francis has used is of a field hospital after a battle. *"The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful,"* he said. *"It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars!*

You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds." Francis says, *"We need a church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of 'wounded' persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, love.*

St Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionists, reflecting on his life exclaimed. *"if I could have my life over and could preach only one sermon, it would be on the total love and mercy of God"*. Whereas, during Pope Benedict 16th time as Pope there seemed to be a belief that the Church was destined to become a small remnant, Francis has a different vision. *"This church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest protecting our mediocrity."*

A hallmark of Francis' teaching is his actions. Often they are powerful symbols, that articulate and confirm his teaching. On Holy Thursday, instead of being at the St John Lateran basilica, he visited the Casal del Marmo jail, a juvenile detention centre just outside Rome. He knelt on the cold stone floor and put his white cap (zucchetto) aside. He washed, dried, and kissed the feet of twelve young inmates, some of them bearing tattoos. Two were Muslim. More pointedly, against Church tradition, two of the apostolic stand-ins were women. When one of the inmates asked the Pope why he had come to them, he said, *"Things from the heart don't have an explanation."*

Recognising the importance of these actions by the Pope, one American cardinal suggested Francis was changing nothing substantial as Pope. He claimed it was a matter of style, rather than substance. When asked about this, Fr Spadaro who had interviewed Francis, banged a book on his desk and exclaimed, *"Style is not just the cover of the book. It is the book itself! Style is the message. The substance is the Gospel. This is what the Gospel looks like."*

One example of Francis' pastoral approach is very much like a modern version of the story of the prodigal son, As Pope, Francis receives 6,000 letters each week. Francis telephoned Anna Romano who had written an emotional letter to him. He assured her that he would baptise her unborn child.

She had told him in her letter that she had refused to have an abortion. She said she wrote to Pope Francis because she had “no one else to turn to, after being left humiliated and betrayed”.

As Archbishop, Francis had addressed his priests, *"In our ecclesiastical region there are priests who don't baptize the children of single mothers because they weren't conceived in the sanctity of marriage, These are today's hypocrites. Those who clericalise the Church. Those who separate the people of God from salvation. And this poor girl who, rather than returning the child to sender, had the courage to carry it into the world, must wander from parish to parish so that it's baptized!"* He compared this concept of Catholicism, *"this Church of 'come inside so we make decisions and announcements between ourselves and those who don't come in, don't belong," to the Pharisees of Christ's time - people who congratulate themselves while condemning all others.*

Francis told Anna that he had read her letter and wanted to speak with her personally and reassure her that someone was worried about her. She said. “We were only on the phone for a few minutes but my heart was filled with joy, and I was rubbing my tummy at the same time as we spoke”. Anna said she told the Pope she wanted to baptise the baby when it was born but was afraid because she was divorced and a single mother, but he said he would be her spiritual father and if she needed him, he would baptise my baby!

There has been some discontent from certain Catholic groups, and even from some bishops, who have criticised Francis' relevant silence on abortion and gay marriage. Francis has said that he thinks the Roman Catholic Church had grown “obsessed” with preaching about abortion, gay marriage and contraception, and that he has chosen not to speak of those issues often despite recriminations from some critics. *"It is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time,"* he told Spadaro and added, *"The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently."*

Of course Pope Francis has spoken several times about abortion and the right to life. Speaking to diplomats in January 2014, Francis said, *"Unfortunately, what is thrown away is not only food and dispensable objects, but often human beings themselves, who are discarded as 'unnecessary.' For example, it is frightful even to think there are children, victims of abortion, who will never see the light of day; children being used as soldiers, abused and killed in armed conflicts; and children being bought and sold in that terrible form of modern slavery which is human trafficking, which is a crime against humanity."*

Pope Francis is seeking to maintain church doctrine, but in imitation of Jesus, he is aware that people fail and wants them to experience compassion. During a morning homily on February 28th, he said that the Church must accompany, not condemn those who experience failure in married life. *"When this love fails,* Francis said, *"because many times it fails – we have to feel the pain of the failure, [we must] accompany those people who have had this failure in their love. Do not condemn. Walk with them – and don't practice casuistry on their situation."*

In his Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (47), Francis invites people to embrace the healing and nourishment of the Eucharist. *"The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems"*.

Francis' simple Pectoral Cross bears the images of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, bearing the lost sheep upon his shoulders in the midst of the flock. Above is the Holy Spirit, radiating down in a ministry of mercy and compassion. Jesus is barefoot and wearing the simple garments of a shepherd boy, like David who became King, and Moses who knelt before the burning bush. This symbol, like so many others we can observe point to Francis' commitment to be pastoral.

Compassion

Following the tragic death of asylum seekers off the coast of Italy, in July 2013, Francis visited Lampedusa where this tragedy occurred and noting what he referred to as global indifference, delivered a powerful homily which included this challenge: *"Where is your brother?" the voice of his blood cries even to me, God says. This is not a question addressed to others: it is a question addressed to me, to you, to each one of us. These our brothers and sisters seek to leave difficult situations in order to find a little serenity and peace, they seek a better place for themselves and for their families – but they found death. How many times to those who seek this not find understanding, do not find welcome, do not find solidarity! Today no one in the world feels responsible for this; we have lost the sense of fraternal responsibility; we have fallen into the hypocritical attitude of the priest and of the servant of the altar that Jesus speaks about in the parable of the Good Samaritan: We look upon the brother half dead by the roadside, perhaps we think "poor guy," and we continue on our way, it's none of our business; and we feel fine with this.*

I want to set before us a question: "Who among us has wept for these things, and things like this?" Who has wept for the deaths of these brothers and sisters? Who has wept for the people who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who wanted something to support their families? We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of "suffering with": the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!

It is one thing to speak such words, but Francis' pastoral emphasis is to put words into practice. Vinicio Riva suffers from neurofibromatosis and his body is covered in painful tumours. Pope Francis hugged Vinicio when he saw him in the crowd following his weekly address.

Vinicio said afterwards that he felt as though his heart was leaving his body as Francis caressed him all over my face. *“As he did that, I felt only love. He drew me to him in a strong embrace, kissing my face. My head was against his chest his arms were wrapped around me. It lasted just over a minute, but to me it seemed like an eternity.”*

A poor Church for the poor

Forty percent of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, live in Latin America. Francis knows this church and its needs and he has chosen to use the global spotlight to focus on the church's mandate to serve the poor and marginalised. He has preached this message by his actions as well as his words. He has chosen to live in a two-room apartment instead of the Apostolic Palace. He has replaced the papal Mercedes with a Ford Focus and ridden in the passenger seat. He has retained his silver cross not using papal gold, and wears his ordinary black shoes instead of the traditional red fashioned slippers. He has carried his own briefcase on to a plane, and lines up for meals along with others at the canteen. When visiting a homeless shelter in May 2013, Francis argued against capitalist values of financial gains and consumerism, which he argues reduce human beings to merely what they consume and produce.

Addressing the homeless people, Francis said, *“To love God and neighbour is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person and face the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely. And you are, dear brothers and sisters, in the face of Jesus.”* On the same day, Francis said, *“When we are generous in welcoming people and sharing something with them—some food, a place in our homes, our time—not only do we no longer remain poor: we are enriched. I am well aware that when someone needing food knocks at your door, you always find a way of sharing food; as the proverb says, one can always ‘add more water to the beans’! Is it possible to add more water to the beans? Always?...And you do so with love, demonstrating that true riches consist not in materials things, but in the heart!”*

Also in May, Francis said, *“I encourage the financial experts and the political leaders of your countries to consider the words of Saint John Chrysostom: “Not to share one's goods with the poor is to rob them and to deprive them of life. It is not our goods that we possess, but theirs. Man is not in charge today, money is in charge, money rules. God our Father did not give the task of caring for the earth to money, but to us, to men and women: we have this task! Instead, men and women are sacrificed to the idols of profit and consumption: it is the “culture of waste.”*

“The financial crisis which we are experiencing makes us forget that its ultimate origin is to be found in a profound human crisis. In the denial of the primacy of human beings! We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal.

We must recover the whole sense of gift, of gratuitousness, of solidarity. Rampant capitalism has taught the logic of profit at all costs, of giving to get, of exploitation without looking at the person... and we see the results in the crisis we are experiencing! This Home is a place that teaches charity, a "school" of charity, which instructs me to go encounter every person, not for profit, but for love. Some homeless people who die of cold on the streets is not news. In contrast, a ten point drop on the stock markets of some cities, is a tragedy. A person dying is not news, but if the stock markets drop ten points it is a tragedy! Thus people are disposed of, as if they were trash."

Francis has been keen to address the causes of poverty and has challenged economic systems. In June 2013, he said, *"A way has to be found to enable everyone to benefit from the fruits of the earth, and not simply to close the gap between the affluent and those who must be satisfied with the crumbs falling from the table, but above all to satisfy the demands of justice, fairness and respect for every human being."*

Also in June, Francis said, *"The proclamation of the Gospel is destined primarily to the poor, to those who often lack the essentials for a decent life. The good news is first announced to them, that God loves them before all others and comes to visit them through the acts of charity that the disciples of Christ carry out in his name."*

In July 2013, addressing Jesuit school students, Francis said, *"These times talk to us of so much poverty in the world and this is a scandal. Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry,"* Francis added, *"Where do I find hope? In the poor Jesus, Jesus who made himself poor for us. And you spoke of poverty. Poverty calls us to sow hope. Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures. Go forward, look there upon the flesh of Jesus. But don't let well-being rob you of hope, that spirit of well-being that, in the end, leads you to becoming a nothing in life. Young persons should bet on their high ideals, that's my advice. But where do I find hope? In the flesh of Jesus who suffers and in true poverty. There is a connection between the two."*

Clericalism and pastoral responsibility

An issue that Francis has spoken about frequently is clericalism and careerism in the Church, as well as corruption within the Vatican. By abandoning traditional external trappings of the papal office, he has spoken as loudly in action as he has in words. *"Clericalism breeds a mentality that revels in ecclesiastical ambition, status and power. For some, especially those attracted to become Bishops, it often leads to an ivory-tower isolation from the real world and indifference to people's pastoral needs."*

Francis has eliminated the title “monsignor” title for priests under the age of 65. The literal meaning of the title is “My lord,” and the red and purple trim added to the cassock, made this an important step up the career ladder for some clerics. It is not surprising that Francis would want to do away with it. Papal nuncios have been advised that titles of honour will not be accepted and where this is granted, it will only be for those over sixty-five years of age. It was the custom for Bishops to apply for this title for their priests. As Archbishop, Francis never applied for the title for any of his priests.

“Careerism is a leprosy,” the pope said in June during a speech to students from the school for future Vatican diplomats. *“All types of priestly ministry require great inner freedom, which calls for vigilance in order to be free from ambition or personal aims, which can cause so much harm to the church. Priests must make their priority the cause of the Gospel and the fulfillment of the mission”* entrusted to them, not self-fulfillment or public recognition”. Francis recalled that John XXIII, had served as a Vatican diplomat for much of his career. And John had said, *“church diplomacy should always be permeated by a pastoral spirit; otherwise, it counts for nothing, and makes a holy mission ridiculous.”*

Francis told a group of seminarians and novices to keep "freshness" and "joy" in their lives, and criticized those who are too serious, too sad. *“Something is not right here. There is no sadness in holiness. If you find a seminarian, priest, nun, with a long, sad face, if it seems as if in their life, someone threw a wet blanket over them, you should conclude “it’s a psychiatric problem, they can go, ‘buenos dias!”*

In responding to a question about women in the Church, Francis said, *“I don’t know where this idea of women cardinals sprang from. Women in the Church must be valued not “clericalised”. Whoever thinks of women as cardinals suffers a bit from clericalism.”* □ He has warned that priests can become "little monsters" if they are not trained properly as seminarians, saying their time studying must be used to mold their hearts as well as their minds.

Faith...With a community

A teenage boy told the pope that he was trying hard to believe in God and be faithful, but that he often struggled with doubt. "What can you say to help me and others like me?" he asked the pope. *“The life of faith is a journey”,* Francis answered. *“Journeying is an art because if we’re always in a hurry, we get tired and don’t arrive at our journey’s goal,”* he said. *“If we stop, we don’t go forward and we also miss the goal. Journeying is precisely the art of looking toward the horizon, thinking where I want to go but also enduring the fatigue of the journey, which is sometimes difficult. ... There are dark days, even days when we fail, even days when we fall ... but always think of this: Don’t be afraid of failures.*

Don't be afraid of falling. What matters in the art of journeying isn't not falling but not staying down. Get up right away and continue going forward. This is what's beautiful: This is working every day, this is journeying as humans. But also, it's bad walking alone: It's bad and boring. Walking in community, with friends, with those who love us, that helps us. It helps us to arrive precisely at that goal, that 'there where' we're supposed to arrive."

In his *Joy of the Gospel*, Francis wrote, "Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. Evangelizers thus take on the "smell of the sheep" and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance. Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time. An evangelizing community is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful.

It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds. An evangelizing (gospel living) community is filled with joy. It celebrates every step forward in the work of evangelization.

Francis notes in his Apostolic Exhortation that "*We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization.*"

Joy

The title of the Apostolic Exhortation released in November 2013, begins "The Joy of the gospel..." Pope Francis has noted that "*There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress.*"

Francis notes that "*Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops.*

If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good. An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! May the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ”.

Francis has noted that we are victims of a culture of the 'temporary, “but *the thrill of a moment doesn't really make us happy.*” He challenges us to find true joy through self-giving in faithfulness to the gospel, and not to seek false joy in material possessions and especially not in *“the joy of the world, the latest smartphone, the fastest car.”* Addressing a group of priests and nuns, he said, *“Cars are necessary. But take a more humble one. Think of how many children die of hunger and dedicate the savings to them,”*

Francis has observed first hand, that those people who contain the greatest joy are the poor. They have a strong dependence on one another, and a great faith and trust in God. The joy of the Gospel is not just any kind of joy. It is the joy that comes from knowing that you are welcomed and loved by God.

Summary

These notes are an attempt to highlight the pastoral emphasis of Francis, rather than to cover all his teaching. For those of us responsible for the faith of children and young adults and have seen them drift away from the church, there is great encouragement from Pope Francis.

It is comforting to hear him say in October 2013, *“God does not save us only by decree, with a law, he saves us with tenderness, he saves us with caresses, he saves us with his life given for us.”* Of course this is totally consistent with the message of Jesus, but condemnation rather than mercy and compassion seem to have been highlighted in recent years and all sorts of people feel excluded – modern day lepers who have received no welcome – until now.

Our Passionist Family Groups can appreciate this positive pastoral approach and extend it through our parish communities and beyond. Our PFG motto is “A Family For All”, and we are being encouraged by Pope Francis to live and proclaim that message. If we are true to his style, the most obvious thing about us will not be that we have a logo or that we say people are welcome in our groups, but that people will see that we are welcoming, joy-filled Christians who truly are a family!

1. What do you find encouraging about Pope Francis?
2. How does his message challenge you?
3. How can our PFG's reflect his vision?

Brian Traynor CP,
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