

MARIAN LECTURE, 11 MAY 2021

CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY? THE POST-COVID CHURCH

I am delighted to be with you this evening to deliver this year's Marian lecture, and to gather around the table with the Marist family, albeit virtually. I have huge admiration for the work the Marists do in education and in the church more broadly, and I always appreciate Marist brothers and leaders for their openness, wisdom and sense of humour.

So I hope we can have a discussion about the future of the church this evening in that spirit: open and honest. I am speaking to you as a professional journalist who has spent a number of years covering the Vatican but I am also a person of faith: a Christian and a Catholic who cares deeply about the future of the church, not just for myself but for my children and coming generations.

The topic I've been asked to address is the post-covid church - crisis or opportunity - and to look at this in the context of Pope Francis' reforms.

The crisis we are facing is a fork in the road. As the Pope says we can come out of it two ways: better or worse. I believe strongly that the crisis offers the post-Covid church an opportunity to rebuild and renew, and that's what I want to focus on this evening.

First, we have to face up to what's in front of us. As is the case for so many institutions, the pandemic has brutally exposed the difficulties already present in the church, particularly when it comes to passing on the faith to the next generation, and attracting new believers.

The empty places of worship which we saw during the lockdown period must serve as a warning of what might happen in the future. People are leaving the church; monasteries and seminaries are closing, young people are turning away.

The closed churches need to be a warning that the *emptying out* of the church will only continue unless reforms are made; reforms that help the church show a different face of Christianity, one that is life-giving and life-changing¹.

This, I believe, is at the heart of the Francis papacy. As I argue in my book, *The Outsider*, the Pope has embarked on a Gospel-based reform - it's not about a new strategy document, or a snazzy set of marketing materials, but a concrete framework for long-lasting renewal.

In the manifesto document for his papacy, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis stresses the importance of presenting the Gospel message without overcomplicating things. It is about missionary simplicity, and keeping it simple.

Over the last years, the Pope has pointing the way to a church which can credibly witness to Jesus' message. One that is less concerned about institutional prestige, power or protocols, but like a field hospital, ready to bind up tthe wounds of humanity. Rather than a fortress style church, grand and imposing, he wants a church that "pitches its tent" among the people.

¹ Tomáš Halík, "Christianity in a time of sickness" 2 April 2020, <http://halik.cz/en/tvorba/clanky-eseje/clanek/642/>

It is why he has embraced a simple lifestyle, refusing to live in the Apostolic Palace, and instead opting for a couple of rooms in a Vatican guesthouse. It is why he is driven in a Ford Fiesta, arranges Covid-19 vaccines for Rome's homeless, and rescues refugees on his papal plane. It is why, during the height of the pandemic he walked out into a totally deserted St Peter's Square, and likened the plight of humanity to the disciples on the boat with Jesus during the storm. He urged the world to have faith reminding them that with the Lord on board "there will be no shipwreck."²

He wants every part of the church institution, including the Vatican, to be focussed on missionary evangelisation, to look outwards and to speak out prophetically. In practice it means "three Cs": *being compassionate* to the plight of the marginalised, *being close* to the people that we serve and taking *concrete steps* in solidarity.

When it comes to the pandemic, we don't have the power to turn the clock back. We can't go back to a time pre-Covid that no longer exists and we can't rely on external structures - important as they are - to save the day. Instead, we need to go deeper into the heart of the Gospel message, and to witness to a trusting faith in the midst of difficulties.

In that spirit of going deeper, I'd like to offer three characteristics of Pope Francis' leadership "in the midst of the storm" that can be applied to our local context, and help point the way forward.

1/ Disruptor

² Pope Francis, "Extraordinary moment of prayer" 27 March 2020
http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html

Francis has been a compassionate “disruptor” in the church, challenging a mentality which says “we’ve always done things this way.” There is a story that, early on in his pontificate, the new Pope was seen in his home of the Casa Santa Marta wearing ordinary clerical dress, rather than the white papal cassock. A monsignor came up to him and said: “Holy Father, it is not permitted for the Pope to be seen without the white cassock”. Francis replied: “says who”, and kept walking.

We can see that this Pope challenges the mindset of “we’ve always done things this way.” He’s broken the mould. He doesn’t have set plan for his papal visits, but responds to the emergencies. His first trip out of Rome was to visit Lampedusa, an island in Southern Italy, where thousands of refugees were arriving from north Africa. He decided to go after reading media reports about the plight of these migrants drowning in the mediterranean when their makeshift rafts sank. He was so moved that he called up Alitalia airlines to book himself a ticket to fly to the island. Alitalia airways didn’t believe it was the Pope calling them.

His challenge is to shake the church out of complacency, and question the status quo, not because he has a new message, but because he wants to go to the heart of the radical, unsettling nature of the Gospel’s message.

At World Youth Day in 2013, the Pope told young people in Rio de Janeiro: “*hagan lio*” which translates at “make a mess,”³ or better:

³ Associated Press (in The Guardian), “Pope tells Brazilian church to keep it simple and reach out to the poor”, 28 July 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/28/pope-brazil-church-message-poor-rio>

“shake things up”. In other words, just settle for things as they are. The Pope told young people in a document written after youth synod: “Take risks, even if it means making mistakes. Make a ruckus! And cast out those fears which paralyse you.”⁴ This is the message of the papal disruptor: the worst thing is to be paralysed by fears. Take the next step in faith even if you’re not sure.

2/ Missionary

Just before the conclave, the then Cardinal Bergoglio gave a speech to the cardinals, a speech which played an important part in having him elected Pope. He said that in the Book of Revelation we read that Jesus stands at the door and knocks. In the Church, however, it seems like Jesus is inside asking to be let out⁵.

A missionary church means ending an inward looking attitude. Francis’ pontificate has offered global leadership on the world stage, particularly when it comes to climate change. In his encyclical *Laudato si’*, Francis makes protection of the environment a moral issue, and one that must be central to the church’s mission. He argues that care for the planet is linked to protection of the poorest: because it is the most vulnerable communities who are most likely to be affected by climate disasters. And by convening a synod on the Amazon region in 2019 he gave voice to the indigenous of the region, whose lives are at risk from deforestation.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Christus Vincit*, 25 March 2019,

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html

⁵ Sandro Magister, “The Last Words of Bergoglio Before the Conclave”, 27 March 2013, L’Espresso, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350484bdc4.html?eng=y>

His concern for the poorest is not political, its biblical. In the Sistine chapel, when it was clear he had won enough votes to be elected, Cardinal Claudio Hummes who was standing next to Bergoglio said: “don’t forget the poor.”⁶ That was a biblical injunction.

The Pope is calling for a Church which models itself on the Good Samaritan, ready to cross the side of the road and help the man who had been left for dead on the side of the road.

3/ Peace-maker

Cardinal Hummers’ words in the conclave are what inspired the Pope to chose the name Francis, the first time that a Successor of St Peter’ had called himself after St Francis of Assisi.

St Francis was renowned for his poverty, care for creation and being a peace-maker. The Pope is holding up this 12th century figure as a model to help heal a wounded world. His latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is rooted in the witness of St Francis, and the title is taken directly for the saint: “Brothers all”, an appeal to all of humanity. In that encyclical he is addressing the pressing social and political challenges of today.

To adapt the famous prayer attributed to St Francis: where there is populism, the Pope wants to focus on people; where there is radical individualism he calls for solidarity; where the free market dominates he calls for a fairer distribution of property; where political opponents hate each other, he urges them to dialogue. And where there is

⁶ Philip Pullella & Catherine Hornby, “Pope Francis wants Church to be poor, and for the poor”, Reuters, March 16 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-poor-idUSBRE92F05P20130316>

aggression on social media the Pope calls for kindness – and to look away from the screen⁷.

This Franciscan approach emphasises the common fraternity that unites all of humanity, and which is the essence of the Gospel. The Pope is arguing that the church needs to be a bridge builder, a healer, a reconciler, and not fall into the trap of ideological divisions.

At a time of increasing political and social polarisation this is needed more than ever, and Francis wants a church where differences and tension can be held together rather than trying to “cancel” the person you disagree with.

The Pope’s approach requires humility. St Francis, who came from a rich family, and rejected the chance to be a man of status and wealth to follow the call of Jesus in the Gospel. It means a stripping away of the obstacles that come between us and God, and this includes in the church . This is hard.

Here we come to the opposition Francis has faced, with a lot of this driven by those who are unsettled or challenged by what the Pope is doing.

Let’s not be under any illusion: there is a battle for the soul for the church underway. Inside the church, in Rome, in wealthy conservative circles in the United States there are people doing all they can to undermine this Pope. Some are already campaigning for a new conclave, and looking for a candidate to be the next Pope who could reverse or slow down Francis reforms.

⁷ Christopher Lamb, “Pope offers Franciscan vision to heal broken world”, The Tablet, 4 October 2020 <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/13437/pope-offers-franciscan-vision-to-heal-broken-world>

Now, the Pope is not perfect. He has made mistakes and he is not somehow above criticism. But as I have agreed, this pontificate has faced something of a guerrilla warfare from opponents since day one. It is unprecedented. Many of those who oppose Francis, I would argue, are like the modern day scribes and doctors of the law who attacked Jesus for his willingness to break the mould by eating with sinners and healing on the sabbath day.

The opposition is a minority, and we shouldn't over estimate it, but it does have the megaphone of the Catholic media and it is influential. I document more than 100 instances of attacks against the Pope in my book. I do so to underline the challenges for reform and renewal in the Church, and the constraints that Francis is working under.

And yet. This battle for the church's future is different from ones in the past. Why? It is because the Pope wants the involvement of ordinary Catholics, women and men, young people in particular, to be at the heart of the church's mission. To be leading it. The future direction of the church no longer rests with a small group of officials in the Vatican because the Pope is now asking ordinary people to be a part of a global discernment and to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying. Francis sees this as the implementing of a "synodal" model of the church, one which "walks together." It means a church which is less clerical, and less hierarchical, and more focussed on mission. *It's a new way of being the church.* Synodality is fundamental to the Pope's reform agenda.

In Australia we see this starting to happen with the Plenary Council process and in Rome the council is seen as one of the most important expressions of "synodality" anywhere in the world and is being

followed closely. The outcomes of the Plenary Council have the potential to reshape the mission of the Australian church, and signal to other countries what is possible, particularly in areas of church governance and the role of women. A synodal church means giving the initiative to local Catholic communities to come up with credible pastoral strategies suited to their culture and context, and it is those on the ground who need to come up with the answers to the burning questions which they are facing. In this way, the Pope is trying to re-balance power in the church, to move it away from the centre and out into the peripheries.

The post-Covid church needs to forge new paths, and synodal processes provide that opportunity. The plenary council, I believe, offers a great opportunity to reshape the church in Australia, to find those new paths, and to offer a contribution to the universal church.

Months before the election of Pope Francis, an interview with Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, former Archbishop of Milan, and a great figure in the 20th century church was published. He had died just before the interview was released.

Martini said: “Our culture has become old, our churches and our religious houses are big and empty, the bureaucratic apparatus of the church grows, our rites and our dress are pompous. Do these things, however, express what we are today?”⁸

The cardinal went on: “I see in the church today so much ash under the embers that often I'm hit with a sense of impotence. How can we liberate the embers from the ash, to reinvigorate the fires of love?

⁸ John L. Allen jr, “Translated final interview with Martini”, National Catholic Reporter, 4 September 2012 <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/translated-final-interview-martini>

In eight years, Francis has done has blown into the embers and start a new fire. He shows that new beginnings are always possible, and that after death comes resurrection.

Of course, turning the Catholic Church around is a bit like turning around an ocean liner: it takes time. The style and model of church emerging during the Francis pontificate is going to face setbacks, disappointments and difficulties. Crucially, however, the journey has started, and the boat has set sail. It's up to all of us make sure it keeps moving, and to embrace this new moment of opportunity.

Thank you for listening.

Questions:

1. *Cara: what does the future look like for women in the Church?*

Women are absolutely crucial to the future of the Church - without women, there is no future. Francis is not changing teaching on the ban on the ordination of women - any change in this area could lead to schism - but he is pushing forward on various other fronts.

Let's remember:

**Francis is opening up new lay ministries for women. He wants to see women leaders and has appointed women to positions in the Vatican.

**The Church is trying to de-link ordination from power. You don't have to be a priest to lead in the Church e.g. Sister Nathalie Becquart appointed to a senior position at the Synod of Bishops' office with a right to vote. We already see women leading in Catholic schools, and parishes, but it needs official recognition.

**What could the future look like? My hope is that we recover the leadership role of women which is clearly shown in the Bible and from the experienced of the early church. We don't know what this looks like yet, but one thing is clear: women need decision making positions in the church and official recognition for the ministry they carry out. This is starting to happen, but it needs to go further. I would like to see, in your lifetime Cara, a woman running the Vatican as Secretary of State, and the possibility of women being able to vote in a conclave that elects a future Pope.

2. Greg from Marist 180: What does Pope Francis have to say in light of our country's refugees, asylum seekers and the plight of our first nations peoples?

First of all, I would like to quote something that Pope John Paul II said in 1986 in Alice Springs to the first nations peoples: "you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day...the Spirit of God has been with you."⁹

These would be Francis' words. He believes the church must stand alongside all indigenous peoples, and to make their suffering the

⁹ Pope John Paul II, Alice Springs (Australia), 29 November 1986, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861129_aborigeni-alice-springs-australia.html

church's suffering, and to walk with them in their struggle for recognition . The Amazon synod in 2019 talked about a “preferential option for indigenous peoples”¹⁰ when addressing the Amazon. I think this is applicable to Australia.

On refugees and asylum seekers, the Pope's policy is a biblical one: “I was a stranger and you welcome me”. That has been his mantra from day one. Policies that turn away refugees should be opposed.

3. Joe: How can we make the Church more inviting and engaging to young people? Fran: What would Pope Francis say about creating a more meaningful and engaging place in the church?

First, the Pope wants young people to take the lead, and he believes that the world, and the Church needs the leadership of young people. This is what came through during the 2018 youth synod in Rome: that the most effective evangelisers of young people are young people themselves.

Second, I think the church needs to really listen to young people; be ready to be challenged and to listen from them about how to do things differently. It is vital to *be open to criticism*. We can see that inter-generational differences are growing fast, but by listening the church can help bridge this gap. I think it's also important to show that Catholic communities welcome people regardless of the sexual orientation or gender identity.

¹⁰ Synod of Bishops, The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Human Ecology, 26 October 2019, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20191026_sinodo-amazzonia_en.html

Third, I think young people are attracted to the social justice message of the church. I think Francis wants to sow the seeds of faith by showing that the church is a place which stands on the side of the marginalised, and the forgotten and through this offers a path to human flourishing and eternal life.