

SEE, JUDGE AND ACT: READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

This year you parishioners of Cowra are commemorating the 75 years since the opening of your parish church, St Raphael's. In 1956 a new church was opened in my home parish of Queanbeyan. It too was placed under the patronage of the Archangel Raphael. The parish priest responsible for St Raphael's, Queanbeyan, was Fr Michael Casey a very stern character who put the fear of God into the parishioners. He mellowed in his later years and I became quite close to him before his death. I asked him what had inspired him to name the new church, St Raphael's. I was surprised by his reply. He reminded me that Raphael means "God's healing" and he commented that we are all in need of healing. I must say that as a youngster, I did not see that aspect of Father Casey's vision. I would imagine that with Cowra's unique connection with World War II, St Raphael would have been frequently invoked as a source of healing during and in the aftermath of the war. Last year I was invited by the ecumenical Order of St Luke in Canberra to give the homily at their annual prayer service which focuses on some particular aspect of healing. I was asked to preach on the Church itself in need of healing. At this moment in our history I think the reasons for that are fairly obvious.

I retired in mid 2012, and a few months later spent two weeks in Italy so that I was able to be in St Peter's Square on 11 October for the Mass which honoured the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. A few days earlier, I had been moved to tears in St Peter's Basilica as I prayed at the tomb of Pope John XXIII whose vision had given birth to Vatican II.

The Second Vatican Council and the Cardijn movement have been key influences in my life as a priest and bishop. I will return to the latter in a moment. My four years of theological study at St Patrick's College, Manly, between 1962 and 1965 coincided with the four sessions of the Second Vatican Council and 1965 the year of my ordination to the priesthood marked the conclusion of the Council.

My early years in the priesthood were full of hope, thanks to Vatican II. I can honestly say that despite many disappointments in the Church in subsequent years, I have never lost that sense of hope. Mass in the vernacular, greater participation in the liturgy, the vision of the Church as the People of God rather than a hierarchical structure, the empowering of lay people, the recognition of human dignity and religious freedom, the richness of the ecumenical movement and the embracing of the realities of the modern world were all sources of great blessing as the message of the Gospel was able to be proclaimed in a way which fulfilled Pope John's vision of renewal. Catholics were challenged to live up to their name as being universal and all-embracing.

In those early years in the mid to late 1960s, I was introduced to the YCW, the Young Christian Workers movement. Its founder, Joseph Cardijn, was a Belgian priest who was challenged by young workers who were being exploited. He encouraged them to band together in a way which would empower them to take control of their lives and help their fellow workers to find the dignity to which we are all entitled.

As a chaplain to the YCW, I saw the importance of listening to young people, learning from them and helping them to reflect on life in the light of the Gospel. At their weekly meeting, the young people would share their experiences and help one another to discern what was happening and look for a course of action. Joseph Cardijn's method of SEE, JUDGE AND ACT was a great example to us all. I discovered the importance of all three steps. The temptation can be to rush to a particular course of action before recognising what the real issues are.

The shared wisdom of the group was invaluable in judging what needed to be done and so too was the solidarity with the other members in embarking on a course of action. The Gospel study was an important ingredient in asking the question of what would Jesus do in such a situation. The Cardijn method was dealing with real people in real life.

I remember too in those early years receiving good advice from one of my younger sisters who said "In your preaching, don't just be talking about things which happened thousands of years ago, but the things which are affecting people's lives today." In recent times, as I read Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, I was particularly moved by what he wrote in relation to the homily. He wrote so beautifully on the challenge to preach the word of God in a way which would touch people's hearts and move them to respond with joy. "The preacher needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people." (154)

Seven years after ordination, I was sent to Rome by my Archbishop to do a doctorate in Canon Law. I chose as the subject of my thesis the International Council of the Laity. It gave me the opportunity to study further the theology of the lay vocation and helped me to see that Vatican II had been heavily influenced by the Cardijn method of meeting people in the reality of their daily lives.

There was a happy chance meeting for me on 11 October 2012 as I made my way through thousands of people also attending the Vatican II anniversary Mass in St Peter's Square. I met up with Devett O'Brien a young man from Brisbane who is the International secretary of the YCS which is the student version of the YCW. I had previously seen the zeal with which Devett had promoted the Cardijn movement in many parts of Australia, including my own diocese of Canberra and Goulburn.

As Pope John XXIII officially convoked the Second Vatican Council on Christmas Day 1961, he urged his fellow Catholics "to read the signs of the times". The Pope showed great optimism as he said the Council would be "a demonstration of the Church, always living and always young, which feels the rhythm of the times". He went on to state the hope "of rebuilding that visible unity of all Christians which corresponds to the wishes of the Divine Redeemer". Finally, he expressed the wish that in a world which is under constant threat of war, all people of good will would be united in striving for peace.

At the opening of the Council on 11 October 1962, Pope John warned against the prophets of gloom, saying that in the face of error, the Church should make use of the medicine of mercy rather than severity. Its message, rather, should be life-giving, enlightened by the light of Christ. Much of this would find expression in the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Its opening words would herald its rich and challenging message: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, particularly those who are in any way poor or afflicted, these too must be the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of all the followers of Christ." It would go on to speak of the importance of engagement with the modern world, the role of dialogue and a willingness on the part of the Church to listen and to learn.

In many ways since becoming a bishop in 1986, I have struggled with the perception that the leadership of the Church had moved away from the great opportunities given by Vatican II. But after the 50th anniversary Mass I wrote "As I left Rome, I felt privileged to have experienced an historic moment of grace on 11 October 2012 and I had hope in my heart for a new flowering of Vatican II which would more clearly enable the Church to show its best self in witnessing to the love of God and showing the face of Jesus to a world hungering for

meaning.” But in the months which followed, I began to wonder how such hopes would come to fruition. Then out of the blue on 11 February last year, Pope Benedict announced that he was retiring. It was a courageous and noble gesture which in the election of Pope Francis would enable the Church to begin to recapture much of the vision and power of the Second Vatican Council. It is amazing how many people have recognised Pope John XXIII in the person of Pope Francis.

At the beginning of this talk I spoke of the Church itself being in need of healing. The horror of clerical sexual abuse which has become increasingly more apparent in recent years is one very obvious symptom but there are many others as well which need to be honestly confronted and dealt with. Four years ago, I wrote for the *Canberra Times* a paper entitled *Much Needed Reform*. I have made that available to you tonight but will quote from some of it as well.

In 1996, I gave a talk in which I expressed my hopes for the Catholic Church. They were that it would be

- a more human Church
- a humbler Church
- a less clerical Church
- a more inclusive Church (and therefore more truly catholic)
- a more open Church
- a Church which finds unity in diversity
- a Church which discovers its whole tradition
- a Church which reflects the person and values of Jesus.

I have restated these hopes many times since, including at the Oceania Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1998 in the presence of Pope John Paul II, the future Pope Benedict XVI and my brother bishops. Surely such aspirations are even more pressing today.

Many Catholics believed that the Church was becoming too comfortable, too respectable yet up until the election of Pope Francis, they felt that nobody was listening to their concerns. Groups calling for reform are regularly dismissed as trouble-makers with little love for the Church when in fact their hearts are breaking for the Church which they see as drifting further away from the message of Jesus. Maybe it has taken the present crisis in the Church to bring us all to our senses. Pope Francis’ willingness to listen and his experience as a very human pastor give us all great hope, but even the Pope recognises the forces which are trying to maintain the status quo.

In 2010, I wrote that the reform needed by the Church involved more than just “tinkering around the edges”. Issues such as the authoritarian nature of the Church, compulsory celibacy for the clergy, the participation of women in the Church and the teaching on sexuality in all aspects cannot be brushed aside. Listening must be a key component of reform and at times that will involve listening to unpalatable truths. It means that all wisdom does not exclusively reside in the present all male leadership in the Church and that the voices of the faithful must be heard.

At Easter that year, I pointed out that it was largely Jesus’ female disciples who stood by him at Calvary, that Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection and that she could legitimately be called an apostle in that she was sent to bring the good news to the other followers of Jesus. I wondered aloud if the Church would be in its present state of crisis if women had been part of the decision-making in the life of the Church.

At the Oceania Synod of Bishops in 1998, I spoke on marginalised people in society and in the Church. I listed four groups of people as being on the margins of the Church: divorced

and remarried people; priests who have left the active ministry; homosexual people and women. At the final Synod Mass I happened to be sitting immediately behind the Cardinals who headed the Vatican Congregations. I asked myself two questions. Firstly, where are the women in their lives, where are the young people in their lives, where is their contact with ordinary people in their joys and struggles? The second question I asked was how many of them aspired to the lofty position they hold in the ranks of the Church. I am not suggesting that they all did but there is no doubt that the Vatican provides a happy hunting ground for careerists. But having got to the top, what satisfaction is there for them so removed from realities of pastoral life which can be so life-giving?

In my twenty-six years as a bishop, I sat through countless meetings where all the participants were men. I knew that the dynamic of those discussions would have been so much more balanced and productive with the input of women. Added to that, the issues being decided upon often had a major impact on women and children. I cringe when I think of Popes, bishops and priests pontificating on sexual ethics without the wisdom and virtue of good women as instruments of the Holy Spirit in the whole process. To my mind, much of the future of the Church depends on a far greater participation of women in the Church. Pope Francis says as much: "We need to create broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church." (103)

The election of Pope John XXIII and the unfolding of the Second Vatican Council were often described in terms of the good Pope opening the windows enabling the winds of the Spirit to blow through the Church. Remarkably since the election of Pope Francis just over a year ago we have heard him so often described as a breath of fresh air. From the moment he stood on the balcony of St Peter's after his election, he put aside many of the formalities and engaged with everyone as a warm and loving pastor, asking for the prayers and blessings of the people before imparting his own. His choice of the name FRANCIS has been backed by his simple life-style, his willingness to meet with others in a down-to-earth manner and his refusal to be isolated from the sometimes harsh realities of life. On Holy Thursday he celebrated Mass not in St Peter's Basilica but in a young offenders' prison where he washed the feet of young women and Muslims. Earlier that day, he reminded a group of priests that as pastors they must be shepherds of their flocks and that they must be willing to embrace the smell of the sheep.

In November last year Pope Francis gave us the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel*. It was his response to the Synod of Bishops which took place in Rome a year earlier and which discussed the New Evangelisation. In a review I was asked to write, I described it as the most enriching and life-giving papal document since Vatican II. For a number of years, I felt that there had been at many levels in the Church a concerted effort to nullify or at least water down the great possibilities offered by the Second Vatican Council.

Now we are given by our Holy Father an unambiguous statement of the way forward for a Church which had become bogged down in introspection and clericalism. The first great surprise was the fact that *The Joy of the Gospel* is so readable. I feel quite comfortable in giving it to people who are trying to make sense of life and wondering what the Church has to offer them in their search. Right at the start Pope Francis tells them: "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew." He goes on to quote Pope Paul VI in reminding us that no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord. I have often lamented that although the word "catholic" means

universal and all-embracing, sadly in practice it has often meant the opposite where much energy has been channelled into saying who is in and who is out, who right and who is wrong or who is worthy.

Earlier, I spoke of eight hopes I had for our Church. It gave me great heart to read Pope Francis giving expression to those and similar aspirations for the future of the Church. But he added another important hope, namely that the Church would be truly missionary. He tells us that “the Gospel joy which enlivens the community of disciples is a missionary joy....Jesus felt it when he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and praised the Father for revealing himself to the poor and to the little ones....This joy is a sign that the Gospel has been proclaimed and is bearing fruit. Yet the drive to go forth and give, to go out from ourselves, to keep pressing forward in our sowing of the good seed remains ever present....God’s word is unpredictable in its power. The Gospel speaks of a seed which, once sown, grows by itself even as the farmer sleeps. **The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking.**” Whenever I see heroic acts of goodness, love and all kinds of virtue well beyond the confines of my own church and belief systems I am reminded that God is at work in countless ways which we should not try to limit or restrict.

In 1990 Manning Clark, the great Australian historian and author, wrote a book called *The Quest for Grace*. It was first brought to my attention by Jesuit priest, Chris Gleeson, editor of the *Madonna* magazine with these words. “Manning Clark talks of the difference between life-straiteners and life-enlargers, between people who have a very measured, narrow view of life and want to contain it, and those who love the banquet of life with a passion and want to share it with others.” Manning Clark’s moving account of his quest for grace articulates what many of us experience on our journey of life and of faith. I am sure that if he were alive today, Manning Clark would be consoled by much of the message of Pope Francis who says unreservedly “The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded.” (23)

We often hear the question: “Are we concerned with mission or maintenance?” Pope Francis answers that question decisively. “I dream of a missionary option, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things...can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation...making ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open.” (27) An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.” (24)

The pope highlights the missionary possibilities of parish life. “The parish is not an out-dated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community...In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers.” Pope John XXIII likened the parish to the village fountain where all could freely come and drink. Pope Francis’ image of the parish is similar. “It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach.” (28)

Over the years, I have read and heard much of the Church’s “preferential option for the poor”. I must say that it always embarrassed me because I saw so little evidence of it in practice. But our new Pope having placed himself under the patronage of the poor man St

Francis seriously challenges us to return to the simplicity and poverty of Jesus. He reminds us that “The Saviour was born in a manger, in the midst of animals, like children of poor families; he was presented at the Temple along with two turtledoves, the offering made by those who could not afford a lamb; he was raised in a home of ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread. When he began to preach the Kingdom, crowds of the dispossessed followed him, illustrating his words ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.’” (197) “This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.” (198)

Pope Francis harks back to a theme on which he regularly preached as Archbishop of Buenos Aires: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church which is concerned with being at the centre and which then ends up by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of being shut up within the structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat.’” (49) It only seems like yesterday that Catholics were considered suspect for speaking in such terms. Now we have a Pope imploring us to live out the Gospel message by confronting the issues before us. But we are reminded that it is people rather than issues which should concern us.

I spoke earlier of the YCW method which urged the young people to read the signs of the times. Pope Francis humbly and realistically recognises that he does not have all the answers but looks to local communities to search out, reflect on and take action in regard to the issues which are impinging on their people. It is not my place to spell out what are the issues facing this community. But as I watch the evening news or read the newspaper, I am confronted with stories of the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, unemployment, homelessness, poverty in a multitude of forms, domestic violence, alcohol induced violence, suicide especially among the young, mental illness, Aboriginal disadvantage, rural crises and drug addiction, as just some of the ills which are plaguing the Australian community. At the heart of these tragic stories is the loss of human dignity. Those of you who are attuned to the various forms of social media will be able to recognise there another set of challenges as well. Of course, there are also many good news stories but unfortunately they do not always attract the same publicity. Sometimes, we can be overwhelmed by the vastness and the complexity of the problems. But I am heartened by the slogan often used by development agencies which encourage us to think globally and act locally. My hope is that smaller communities are able to promote more personal contacts than are possible in bigger cities. Personal friendships, neighbourly concern and simple acts of kindness can be powerful antidotes to many of our contemporary evils.

Within our church communities, we need to ask how missionary and outward looking are we, how welcoming are we to newcomers, how joyful are our liturgies, how relevant are our homilies and how valued and engaged are our parishioners. Pope Francis has re-affirmed

the Catholic Church's commitment to the ecumenical movement where we would recognise every baptised person as our sister or brother in Christ. He reminds us, as did Pope John XXIII, that what unites us as Christians is greater than what divides us. Throughout the Apostolic Exhortation, the Pope speaks of the imperative of dialogue on many different levels, ranging from the quest for world peace to harmony within family life. The Pope reminds us that the credibility of the Christian message is jeopardised while Christians remain divided and that we must never forget that with all Christians we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. I have witnessed in the Diocese of Bathurst many splendid examples of ecumenical hospitality, combined witness and a real yearning for full Christian unity. I am reminded of an ecumenical principle which states that churches should only act separately in areas where they cannot conscientiously cooperate together. I suggest that the SEE, JUDGE and ACT process is a valuable means of building up unity at many different levels.

In conclusion let me say that I find the image of the pilgrim Church a very attractive one. We are not standing still but are being constantly called to move forward, often re-adjusting to changing circumstances, sometimes falling over or getting a bit lost. Always we need Jesus and our fellow Christians as companions on the journey. Sometimes we find change difficult, but we are reminded by Cardinal John Henry Newman: "In a higher order it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often." I think too of the French philosopher, Charles Peguy who writes of the Church's struggle with relevance: "At each new turn of the age, the Church arrives a little late and a little breathless."

In 2012, I saw two very enjoyable films. *THE WAY* is a lovely account of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. I had the good fortune of doing parts of that pilgrim walk in 2003 and 2008 and I am still uplifted by the experience: the walking, my fellow-pilgrims, the local people, the sense of adventure, the time to reflect, the beautiful country-side, the bridges, the almost daily surprises and a sense of achievement at the end. It is a stunning expression of the pilgrim church as it brings together people of varying shades of faith and differing perspectives on life. The other film was *THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL* which is the delightful story of a group of English retirees who find themselves under false pretences in an Indian hotel which is pretty basic to say the least. When things become chaotic which they often do, the unflappable young hotel owner has a reassuring line, "Everything will be all right in the end, and if everything is not all right at the moment, it simply means that we have not yet reached the end."

I leave the very last words to Pope Francis who gives expression to the deepest sentiments of my heart: "We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach. Our infinite sadness can only be cured by infinite love." (265)

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