

## **A SPECIAL DECADE OF EVANGELISATION – 1991 – 2000**

### **A Starting Point**

#### **HOMILY AT THE CATHEDRAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT PENTECOST SUNDAY, MAY 19, 1991**

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Pope John Paul II has called on us to use this final decade of the twentieth century since Our Lord's birth as a time for renewed evangelisation. And we are all wondering where on earth to start.

Well, I'd like to suggest that we start with ourselves. As Pope Paul VI reminded us: those who evangelise also need to be evangelised.

Of course, that's a job that's never finished, but unless our own lives show pretty clear evidence of what we say we believe, then other people have no way of knowing that following Christ makes any real difference, or that he matters very much.

I'm talking about the quality of our personal faith. But first, I want to share with you an image of the Church drawn for us by Father Fallon of Sydney which you might find helpful. He says:

The Church of yesterday can be likened to a river barge. It was a large barge, with straight front and sides and a flat bottom, well built for navigating a river, and able to carry everything. There were churches on it and schools and presbyteries and convents and monasteries. There were clubs and tennis courts, YCW and CYM and the Children of Mary.

The Priest was trained to pilot the barge along the river. The river had many bends, and it was not always easy going. There were alligators and swamps, and now and then rapids to be negotiated. But on the whole the river was fairly predictable. The pilot could learn his job in a seminary and carry it out well enough if he followed the instruction book. (This is an over-simplification, but it does capture some of the truth).

Our problem is that in our time the river has entered the sea, with obvious results for the barge. There is nothing wrong with reaching the sea: that is where rivers are meant to go. But the barge which had done an excellent job in bringing us down the river, is not built for breaking through waves and negotiating the open sea. We have had to face up to the experience of chaos, as the waves crash against the flat prow of the barge, causing it to shudder and almost break apart, with the loss of some of its cargo.

It is understandable that those on the barge suffered shock, and many because desperate. Some tried to row back upstream, but that proved impossible. Some jumped overboard hoping to survive in small dinghies. But dinghies are too small to carry the mission of the Church, and are no better than a barge in the open sea.

Others, unable to face what was happening, sat in the pilot's cabin with the blinds down and painted river scenes on the windows, trying to convince themselves and others that they were still on the river, and that everything would be all right if everyone kept on doing what they were trained to do.

But at the Second Vatican Council, the leadership of the Church agreed that in the modern world is where the Church needs to be.

It's a useful image because it reminds us that what changed so dramatically was the environment in which the Church lives and carries out its mission.

What is the Church's mission in the sea of life? It's mission is to be a sign of what Jesus called God's kingdom.

God's kingdom is the eventual fullness of love and life and justice and peace and reconciliation and beauty and freedom – that is what God made us for.

But people need to experience love and reconciliation and freedom and justice and peace in order to catch a glimpse of what they were made for.

It's the mission of the Church – i.e. all of us – to embody these things in our lives and so be a sign to people of their marvellous destiny.

However, I put it to you quite seriously that our “normal” way of living the faith is not sufficient to make the Church that kind of sign. Something deeper is needed.

Catholic practices, Catholic devotions, Catholic doctrines, Catholic schools all have their place, but they are, as it were, the superstructure of Christian life.

If they are not impacting effectively on the lives of some Catholics, let alone on other people, then perhaps we need to look at the infrastructure of the Church's life.

That infrastructure is personal faith; really personal believing in Christ and commitment to his gospel.

God's gift of faith can come to people at any stage of life. But, today let's just focus on ways of nurturing the faith during the very earliest years of life, which, for most people, is in the family. Let's listen again to this beautiful passage from Pope Paul VI:

At different moments in the Church's history and also at the Second Vatican Council, the family has well deserved the beautiful name of “domestic Church”...

In a family which is conscious of its mission, all the members evangelise and are evangelised. The parents not only communicate the gospel to their children, but they can themselves receive the same gospel back from their children as deeply lived by them.

I'd like to list for you just some of the ways we can pass on the gift of faith during those very first years when a person is already being formed for life. Without this formation in personal faith, everything else, including our devotions and doctrines and schools simply cannot be effective.

So, here are ten things you need to give your children if you want them to have the faith.

### **A sense of wonder**

Without a sense of the mystery and wonder of life, there will be no deep respect for life, no sense of creation being a gift, a gift that was never owed to us; no sense of why we need to live gratefully, humbly, justly.

This undergirding sense of wonder at the mystery and gift of creation needs to start in childhood. Read again Father Dave O'Neill's little book called *What do you say to a Child when you meet a Flower?* And tell your children what *you* say when you look at the stars.

### **Icons**

Never underestimate the power of a good quality holy picture hanging silently above a child's bed, where it is contemplated during that precious time when the child opens its eyes on the world at the beginning of each day.

Icons speak to us; they form us. In their light we see ourselves better; we see our life as reaching beyond the limits of this world. We get a sense of our belonging to the communion of saints, and of heaven as our true home.

### **Good memories**

Out in the sea of life, it is easy to get lost for a while. When that happens, what matters is that one has memories of something better, something to come back to; memorable moments of living faith.

Children's earliest memories are their most lasting memories, and it is important that these include good memories – experiences of the gospel bringing joy.

That's why you take your children with you when you go to visit the poor, the lonely and the dying – isn't it! Or do we even cut ourselves off from these privileged moments of encounter with Christ. That's where Christ said we could expect to meet him, and that's what we want for our children, isn't it?

Do we grace important moments of family life with prayer and thanksgiving? Or do we allow these moments to pass of ungraced, unmemorable?

### **Role models**

Everyone know that children need people they can look up to, and let these include Buck Shelford and Waimarama Taumanu. But there are other heroes, too, of even grater fame.

Do you every read to your children the heroic stories of those men and women who are now called the saints?

The saints are the evidence that no matter how human we are, or how ordinary, to live by the gospel really is possible. The saints are proof of this, because they were no different from us.

That's the evidence we deprive our children of by not telling them these very human but marvellous stories.

### **Biblical prayers**

– the simple prayers that were prayed by people who met Jesus of Nazareth, and that have been prayed over and over again ever since.

For example, the leper whose situation was totally hopeless until he met Jesus and called out “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me.”

Or the father who wanted Jesus to cure his son, but believing was a struggle, and the best he could manage was “Yes, Lord, I do believe, please help my unbelieving.” It was honest and it was enough.

Or the centurion who said to Jesus “Lord, I am not worthy that you should come to my place. You just say the word and it will be all right.”

Or the publican who from the back seat in the temple prayed “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Or Jesus' own prayer at the most difficult moment of his life “Father, not mine, but your will be done.”

The point is, these are prayers we all need to pray at different moments of our life. It's true they presuppose adult experience of life. But they are the kind of prayers in which we open ourselves to God, which is precisely what children, too, are capable of doing, beautifully. These are prayers that they can grow into. Moreover, if we pray with the scriptures, we pray with a sense of how Christ responds to those who go to him.

### **A Fond regard for Jesus of Nazareth**

In his person and life, and words and actions, Jesus is the way, the only way, and the absolutely sure way, we can know what God is *really* like. Every other way is an estimate only. He is what God looks like when God comes into our world and our history and our lives.

Do we provide our children – do we provide ourselves – with the space and the time to see what he was like, and is like? Do we contemplate those scenes which have been recorded in the gospels for our sakes?

E.g. that occasion after a long day with the crowds, when he had sent them home, and sent his disciples on ahead, and the gospel writer says “he slipped away into the hills, alone, to pray, and when it was late in the night, he was still there on the land, alone.”

Or, after one of the times he had been harassed and criticised, when he needed to create his own moment of space, and the gospel writer says “the same day, Jesus, going out from the house, sat by the sea.” It's interesting what can happen when you just go and sit with him...

It is out of scenes like these that there is born in us deep gratitude, deep trust in God, the ability to anticipate the outcome of our own life, because it is in his hands, and so live with joy.

These are the underpinnings of a faith that doesn't get snuffed out by crises, or tragedies, or even injustices.

### **The crucifix**

Do we teach our children – do we do it ourselves – to take the crucifix in their hands, look closely at the one on it, remember who he is, and why he was there? Perhaps saying in the words of St Paul “you loved me and you gave yourself up for me” and made my life worthwhile forever. This, too, belongs to Christian faith.

### **Moments of silence**

Without these none of these other precious moments in the development of our faith will ever happen.

### **Love for the human church**

Not a hypothetical, perfect, unreal church, but the community of Christ's people, who despite all their weaknesses, keep alive that faith which expresses itself in good memories, sacred moments, icons, real credible role models, biblical prayers, and so on.

Our personal faith has its roots in the life of the Church. We come to faith more fully in the community of faith. our belonging to Christ is nurtured through our belonging to the body of Christ.

Personal faith doesn't mean private faith or being independent of the faith community. That is a different cult, of recent and not Christian origin. Christian faith is about belonging to a community which has its origins in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

Our belonging to that community links us to those events. And we show our belonging by participating in the life of that community. Celebrating the Eucharist is at the very heart of belonging and believing.

### **A sense of the Church being more than just human**

It is actually Christ – the Christ who rose and shares with us his victory over death and his joy. The Church is what results from our union with him. That's why it's called holy. And creating this Church is the work of the Holy Spirit, which is what we read about best of all in the Acts of the Apostles.

When our children are ready for adventure stories, give them the Acts of the Apostles. That's where they will get a picture of the Church that is interesting and alive (and more like a hovercraft than a boat.)

It exploded into being at the first Pentecost, as we heard in today's scripture readings. Suddenly the disciples saw what God was doing. In the resurrection of Jesus, human history emerged out of darkness into the light. Its purpose was revealed. The whole of creation was in labour (St Paul's image). Christ was the first-born of many brothers and

sisters (St Paul's image). Those who are united to him through faith and the sacraments already belong with him – are “seated with him in heavens” (St Paul's image).

People don't know their own marvellous dignity, or who they really are, until they know that about themselves. And that's what the disciples went out to tell them. It really was good news; great news, and telling it was high adventure.

Children whose faith is formed through reading the Acts of the Apostles will *want* to believe and to belong, and will want to know what it's like being called by Christ and sent by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And they'll know they have all this in the Catholic Church.

If you haven't read the Acts of the Apostles yourselves for a while, do so; it'll give you a whole fresh perspective on what the Church is.

Those, then, are some of the ways we pass on the gift of faith. Some of you might be saying: surely the things you have mentioned are the things we always used to do – when the ship was, as you say, still on the river.

How right you are! It's only some of the ship's superstructure that had to change in order to cope with the sea. But whether the Church is in the nineteenth century or the twenty first, the need for personal faith is always the same. It is the infrastructure, without which there is no going anywhere.

Personal love for Christ, trust in him, openness to him, gratitude to him, undergirds everything else and even enables the superstructure to make sense.

It's when our personal faith in him is very real that meeting him means something to us – meeting him in the sacraments of the liturgy, walking with him through the seasons of the liturgy, meeting him daily in prayer.

It's when our personal faith is very real, that's also when the doctrines of the faith come alive with wonderful meaning.

When one's personal faith is real, that's when others can see that Christ does make a difference; that's their introduction to him.

When one's personal faith is real, that's when one's life bears the fruits of faith – the works of justice and mercy and reconciliation.

And that's when the world has the sign Christ intended it to have when he consecrated us to God at our Baptism, and made us his Church.