

# **“For We Walk by Faith, Not by Sight” (2 Cor 5:7)**

## **Prison Ministry Day**

St. Andrew Kim

27 October 2018

### ***Introduction***

At the outset, before reflecting with you on, I really want to express my profound gratitude to all of you who share in the work of Catholic Charities Justice Services in prison ministry as chaplains, volunteers and prayer warriors. As always, my esteem is unbounded for the spirit, drive, competence and love shown by CCJS: Maureen Donegan, Bob Buckham and Angela Veters. You are all an inspiration. Congratulations on developing such providential programs which serve all those touched by crime – and all the faithful and beyond of the Archdiocese of Vancouver. If I could sing right now, I would sing your praises!

You all deserve not only my thanks but the profound appreciation of the whole Archdiocese which benefits from the practical and concrete witness you give to Our Lord’s words, “I was in prison, and you visited me” (Mt 25). By your presence and activities among the incarcerated and recently released offenders, as well as by your support for victims and for prisoners’ families, you are proclaiming the Gospel of mercy.

Prison ministry involves witnessing and hearing first-hand the effects of violence, fear, injustice, lack of faith and hope. It means

hearing stories of lives shattered and changed: those of victims and their families; and of perpetrators and their families. When a person is in prison their families and friends, let's not forget, often feel in prison with them – humiliated and ashamed, and therefore secretive about what is happening in their lives.

All this pain could overwhelm those who become involved in prison ministry were it not for the growth in understanding of forgiveness, reparation and redemption. Such encounters open possibilities to deepen our faith in the God who can, quite literally, do the impossible, “for nothing is impossible to God.”

All of you are involved in a ministry where you are walking “by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7) because you bring the goodness and tenderness of God to those who commit or suffer from crime. Moreover, you are able to show mercy in your ministry because you recognize something deep within yourself: that God mercy has been merciful to you and this impels you to be merciful yourself. You do not hold on tightly to this gift of Divine Mercy, but you have received it gratefully and then want to re-gift that same mercy to others.

Thank you for sharing in the Church's mission, which is “to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 12.

### ***The Text from 2 Corinthians 5:7***

The theme for this 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Volunteer Support and Development Day is a quote from St. Paul's Second Letter to the early Christians of Corinth, a city in Greece which some of you may have visited. Has anyone here been to Corinth, not far from Athens?

Before drawing out a few reflections from the text, let's take a look at what St. Paul was getting at when he wrote this nearly 2000 years ago.

First to the context. We need to look at the previous verse where the Apostle writes: "we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:6-7). Paul affirms that, while on earth we are "at home in the body"; we are here and so, in a certain way "away from the Lord." Although Jesus is truly present with us, journeying with us in our lives, we are still waiting for the full realization of his promises. In a word, we are not yet in our heavenly homeland.

Paul then explains the appropriate way for us to live while "at home in the body": we are to "walk by faith." During our earthly pilgrimage we are to live in this life "by faith."

What does this mean for St. Paul to live "by faith"? Two things. It means both trusting in God as good and merciful and caring, and conducting oneself as Jesus did during his life; that is, in self-giving love. The opposite of walking "by faith" is walking "by sight"; this kind

of walking is by taking into account only what is seen and concrete, and therefore transitory. leaving aside the supernatural world in which we find our true and fullest existence.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Contemporary Context***

A particularly dangerous situation for people of faith has arisen in our times. Now a form of atheism – those without faith in God – exists which we can call “practical.” It doesn’t bother to deny the truths of faith but simply casts faith in Providence aside, deeming it irrelevant to daily life and pointless. Others might believe in God, but in a superficial manner, and therefore live “as though God did not exist.”

By removing God and his plan expressed in the Commandments Beatitudes, and spiritual and corporal works of mercy, a moral vision takes over policy, including in the criminal justice system, which obscures or limits understanding the human person, every human person, as a child of a loving God, who has an inherent dignity because created in his image and likeness.

Faithful to Christ’s mandate, however, the Church repeatedly affirms the truth about the human person and about his destiny. The Second Vatican Council affirms this concisely:

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Thomas D. Stegman, *Second Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 126-127.

The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence.

*(Gaudium et Spes, n. 19).*<sup>3</sup>

Whenever we forget who we are as persons, a being created with intrinsic dignity because he or she is created in God's image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26-27), then we cannot truly appreciate why mercy – a divine characteristic – must complement our human application of justice.

### ***What Is Faith?***

But let's now look a little more closely at just what it means when we say "I believe," which is an action of faith. If we do this, we can recognize why today's text is suitable for you as prison ministers.

First of all, to walk by faith is a profoundly personal act. Think, for example, of the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment in the hope of being healed (cf. Mt 9:20-21); she entrusted herself totally to the Lord, and he said: "your faith has made you well" (cf. Mt 9:22). He also said to the lepers, to the only one who turned back in thanks: "your faith has made you well" (cf. Lk 17:19).

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (14 November 2012).

Thus to have faith is to be engaged in a personal encounter of trust. It is reaching out to touch Christ's garment, being touched by him, to find Christ's love.<sup>4</sup>

Yet our faith is more than trusting in God's mercy and love. More than just an act of the heart, it is also an act of the mind and will. It also means to believe, to accept all that God has revealed to us in the history of salvation as recorded in Scripture, but above what he has communicated to us in the life, ministry, Death and Resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

You might know the expression "keep the faith" or what St. Paul wrote as he neared death: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). Here, "*the* faith" refers to the Gospel message in its wholeness. Before he dies, Paul insists that he has not changed what he received as the truth of the Good News.

"To walk by faith" is, therefore, to believe in Jesus, to trust in him, but also to accept all that he taught and passed on to the community of disciples upon whom he sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

To walk by faith in your ministry is to affirm by your actions, that you believe that the love of God is not defeated even in the face of evil actions, but that it is capable of transforming it, of changing them.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Lectio Divina* with the Roman Clergy (23 February 2012),.

## ***“Abraham, Our Father in Faith”***

In the liturgy we call Abraham “our faith in faith.” Let me say a little about why this is so. Abraham is the first great figure in the Bible for speaking of faith in God. He is the great patriarch, an exemplary model, the father of all believers (cf. Rom 4:11-12).

The Letter to the Hebrews presents it in this way: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents like Isaac and Jacob had, heirs with him of the promise. For he looked forward to the city which has sound foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:8-10).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is referring here to the call of Abraham, recounted in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. What did God ask of this patriarch? He asked him to set out, leave his own country to journey to the land that he would show him: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1).

Can you see your call to prison ministry in this light? As an act of faith, trusting that the good Lord will lead you on the path he wants and that he will give you the grace for the journey?

The word spoken to Abraham contains both a call and a promise.

First, it is a call to leave his own land, a summons to a new life, the beginning of an exodus which points him towards an unforeseen future. It also made a promise: that his descendants would be great in number, and that he would be the father of a great nation (cf. Gen 13:16; 15:5; 22:17).<sup>5</sup>

Yet Sarah, his wife, was barren. She was unable to bear children; and the land to which God was leading him was far from the land of his. It was already inhabited by other peoples and would never really belong to him.

How would we have responded to such an invitation? In fact it meant setting out with no directions, no knowledge of where God would lead? The Lord asked you to trust him, to have faith in him when he invited you to prison ministry.

The spiritual condition of Abraham is that of those who agree to follow the Lord, who decide to set out in response to his call.

Abraham was blessed because in faith he was able to discern the divine blessing, going beyond appearances – not walking “by sight” – but rather trusting in God’s presence even when God’s paths seemed mysterious to him.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 9.

What does this mean to us? When we “walk by faith,” we are saying, like Abraham, “I trust in you, I entrust myself to you, O Lord,” and not just as to Someone to turn to solely in times of difficulty or to whom to devote a few moments of the day or week. “Walking by faith” means founding my life on him, letting him guide it every day, in practical decisions, such as the one to become involved in this ministry.<sup>6</sup>

### *Faith as Light*

Like Abraham, for whom faith in God shed light on what he was to do with his life, those who believe, see. They see with a light that illumines their entire journey and on the practical decisions they make. This light comes from the Christ, the true “light of the world,” the morning star which never sets.<sup>7</sup>

There is an urgent need, then, to understand that walking by faith is walking, not in darkness, but in the light. The light of faith is capable of illuminating *every aspect* of human existence. It cannot come from the “sight” of mere appearances but must come from a more powerful source; that is, it must come from God. In him alone is our trust.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (23 January 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 1.

## *Faith in Action: Washing the Feet of Others*

I wish to conclude my reflection by reaffirming that faith must prove itself in action if it is not to be a dead faith. Faith lightens our path so that we might do good works. Let me illustrate this from Jesus' action at the Last Supper.

After washing the Apostles' feet, he concludes his discourse by saying: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:15). Washing feet. At that time, feet were washed by slaves: it was a slave's task. People travelled by road – without smooth or even rough cobblestones. The roads were dusty and people's feet got dirty. That's why at the entrance to a house there slaves were waiting to wash visitors' feet. It was a service carried out by slaves. And Jesus wanted to offer this service: to set us an example of how we should serve one another.<sup>8</sup>

He invites us to bend down, like him, among the thorns, risking to hurt ourselves picking up the lost sheep. He wants to heal our wounds, to soothe our feet which hurt from travelling alone, to wash each of us clean of the dust from our journey. He doesn't ask us where we have been, he doesn't question us what about we have done. Rather, he tells us: "Unless I wash your feet, you have no share with me" (Jn 13:8).

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Francis, Homily, Holy Thursday (29 March 2018).

And he wants us to do likewise.

Through us now, his instruments on earth, Jesus comes to meet saint and sinner alike, so that he can restore everyone's dignity as a child of God. He wants to help everyone – and here we can say, especially the incarcerated and those recently released from prison – to set out again, to resume their journey, to recover their hope, to restore their faith and trust. He wants them, with clean feet, to keep walking along the paths of life, and to realize that confinement is never the same thing as exclusion.<sup>9</sup>

Washing feet: that is what you are doing through your prison ministry.

### ***Rehabilitation***

It is painful when we hear some people and policy makers talk as if the criminal justice system should not be concerned to care for the wounds of the incarcerated, to soothe their pain or, above all, to offer them new possibilities by working towards reintegration into society.

Think of how the first Christians dealt with their former persecutor, Saul, who became Paul. At first the community was probably terrified to welcome into their midst a former persecutor of their fellow Christians, including the murder of Stephen. His attitude of violence must surely

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Francis, Address at Correctional Facility, Philadelphia (27 September 2015).

have challenged the faith of the first believers in the same way that we are challenged today by those who have harmed others. But they accepted him, because they believed that God had set him apart for his service.

It is still painful, nonetheless, when we see people who think that only others need to be cleansed and purified, and do not recognize that their weariness, pain and wounds are also the weariness, pain and wounds of society. The Lord tells us this clearly when he washes our feet, so we can come back to the table from which he wishes no one to be excluded. The table which is spread for all and to which all of us are invited.

The time in prison can only have one purpose: to help the incarcerated get back on the right road, to give them a hand to rejoin society.

All of you are part of that effort. All of us are invited to encourage, help and enable rehabilitation, rehabilitation which everyone seeks and desires: inmates and their families, correctional authorities, social and educational programs. Such a rehabilitation benefits and elevates the morale of the entire community and society.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Francis, Address at Correctional Facility, Philadelphia (27 September 2015).

## ***Conclusion***

To conclude I want to thank you for walking by faith in walking side by side with the incarcerated and recently released. What a splendid ministry you are engaged in! And above all, I wish to end by offering a cordial thanks to all those who organized this day, including the CWL and priests of St. Andrew Kim Parish.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver