

Sunday 23-B

St. Francis of Assisi Parish Visit

9 September 2018

Dear Father Gino and dear parishioners of St. Francis of Assisi Parish:

Introduction

As many of you know, this past Thursday evening I began a formal visit of your parish.

For me, this experience of meeting so many people who are engaged in the life of your parish family, including your wonderful school, a concrete witness to the flourishing of your community, has been extraordinarily encouraging. I had the pleasure of visiting with nearly every parish group, and I see many of you here this morning at this Mass. We listened to one another; I heard of their contributions to building up the parish, often over many years of dedicated service; I picked up tips on parish life that I can share with other parishes; and I offered my own observations on certain questions that came up in discussion.

And I am enormously grateful to the wonderful hospitality offered, to all those who organized the visit – always a challenging chore to get so many people together – and to those of you who took the time to come together. I thank you most sincerely.

It was impressive to hear how, in so many instances, the archdiocesan goals and priorities are helping you plan your various activities.

It has also been inspiring to witness first-hand what your parish family, under the wise and zealous guidance of your pastor, is accomplishing for the good Lord and his Church. So many spiritual gifts and good works are present among you. I certainly urge everyone to become engaged in building up the Body of Christ through involvement in one or more of the parish activities and organizations. Continue to build on your successes, inviting ever more parishioners to share in your many ministries, especially those who are younger and not yet as fully integrated and involved as those who have found a home here for many years. Welcoming new members to our organizations and planning on succession are necessary for a community to flourish as the good Lord wishes.

Lastly, I would like to share with you an observation from Pope Francis when he describes his expectations of what a parish should be concentrating on today. As you know, he speaks often of the Church as a field hospital where we treat the wounded urge. Parishioners are first-responders who must go out into the field to pick up and bring to the hospital those who are in need – in need of the healing that only the Lord can give, such as we heard in this morning's Gospel.

Allow me to cite from Pope Francis’s exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel,” where he describes the 21st century parish in a way which stresses the importance of this family being both a community of disciples who live the Gospel and a community of missionaries who go out to others with this Good News. Here’s what he wrote:

While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if it [the parish] proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.” This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. 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.¹

¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 28.

Today's Gospel

The opening of someone who is closed up themselves is what today's Gospel is about. Jesus heals a deaf-mute in a pagan, that is, non-Jewish, territory. First he welcomes him and takes care of him with the language of gestures which is so often more direct than words. And then, using an Aramaic term, he says "*Eph'phatha,*" that is, "be opened," restoring the man's hearing and speech.

We can see in this "sign" – for that is what a miracle is, a pointer to God's presence in our midst – Jesus' ardent desire to overcome our loneliness and isolation, so that we can truly communicate with others and with God.² In a certain way, the deaf-mute reminds us of those who shut themselves up in a presumed autonomy, which leaves them isolated from God and often from their neighbour as well.

Jesus turns to this man to restore to him the capacity to open himself to the One who is Other and to others, in an attitude of trust and freely-given love.³ For the deaf-mute, healing meant an "opening" to others and to the world, an opening which, starting with the organs of hearing and speech, involved his whole self and his whole life: he could at last communicate and thus relate in a new way to those around him.

² Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Viterbo (6 September 2009).

³ Cf. St. John Paul II, Homily at Jubilee of University Professors (10 September 2000).

However, we all know that a person's closure and isolation do not only depend on the sense organs. There is an inner closure, a bottling up, that affects the person's inmost self, which the Bible calls the "heart." It is this heart that Jesus came to "open," to liberate, so as to enable us to live to the full our relationship with God and with others.

The deaf-mute can represent each of us personally but also all of us together as a parish community, those who are hard of hearing and unable to speak. Jesus is reminding us that listening to and proclaiming God's word must be a priority for every disciple and for the community of disciples in a parish. You are called to be missionary disciples.

Every one of us was born spiritually deaf and mute because of original sin. But each of us in Baptism has received the gift of being able to hear the Word of God and to speak it, to proclaim it out loud to others.

The first place for us to hear God's word is in the Scriptures as they are proclaimed *in* the Church and *by* the Church. To listen to the word of God by reading and praying – truly listening to – the Scriptures, letting ourselves be amazed by their newness that never grows outdated and whose meaning is never exhausted. In this way we can overcome our deafness to the voice of Christ in our daily lives.

Let's go the next step. With Jesus' touch and the power of his word, the deaf man not only regained his hearing but also his ability to speak. Hearing and speaking go together.

Anyone who listens – truly listens – to the Word of God can and must speak of it and transmit it to others, to those who have never heard it, or who have forgotten it and buried it.

The small word, “*ephphatha*, be opened,” sums up in itself Christ’s entire mission. He was made man so that we, rendered inwardly deaf and mute by sin, might be able to hear God’s voice, the voice of Love that speaks to our heart, and thus in his turn learn to speak the language of love, to communicate with God and with others in this way.⁴

True Communication

Our readings also open the door to say a word about what true communication really means.

Today, with so many kinds of media, we are informed, even over-informed. Is this a bad thing? No. It is good and useful, but we do run the risk of information overload. We risk becoming “museums,” storing up all sorts of things but not knowing what to do with them.⁵

The great challenge facing us today is to learn once again how to talk to one another, not simply how to generate and consume information. The latter is a tendency which the influential communications media encourages: information and more information.

⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (9 September 2012).

⁵ Cf. Francis, Conversation with Young People, Manila (18 January 2015).

Fill yourself with the “facts” they supply you. Information is important, but it is not enough.

What happens to frustrate real communication? All too often things get simplified, different positions and viewpoints are pitted against one another, and people are invited to take sides, rather than to see things from a wider point of view.⁶

Let’s hear Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*, his recent encyclical: Furthermore, when media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. . . . True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today’s media do enable us to

⁶ Cf. Francis, Message for the 49th World Communication Day (2015).

communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise (n. 47).

Conclusion

As we continue our Mass this afternoon, let us ask the Lord to cure any blindness and deafness in us, so that we may be truly his free sons and daughters.

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