

SET ALL ABLAZE: PARISHES WHICH RADIATE CHRIST

INTRODUCTION: PARISHES OASES OF MERCY

There are some parishes which really are oases of mercy.

I can think of one in Rome.

It's called *Sant'Egidio*.

It was a normal parish for centuries – till, in the 1980s, some of the young professionals who worshipped there began to meet each day for prayer after work. After a while, they felt they should be helping the poor whom they passed on their way to church.

They began to feed them with a soup kitchen which then developed into a night shelter.

It attracted a large number of Eritreans whose real need they realised was help with literacy; so they organized themselves to educate them as well as providing them food and shelter.

On Christmas Day, the church is transformed, after Mass, into a great dining room. And not just on Christmas Day.

I had supper with a young woman who works full-time as a hospital secretary but is allowed by her boss to take a long lunch-break one day each week to serve in the soup-kitchen.

“How many people came there today?” I asked her.

She reflected; and then said, “Well, a good two hundred, I'd say.”

You can imagine - it's one of Pope Francis's favourite places.

Because it's an oasis of mercy.

I use the phrase deliberately, oasis of mercy – because it's his.

He used it in the Letter which he called *The Face of Mercy*.

There he said, “Wherever there are Christians everyone should find an oasis of mercy ... The Church is authentic and credible only when she becomes a convincing herald of mercy.” (25)

As soon as I heard it, it reminded me of something which St John XXIII had said about parishes.

He said, “A parish should be like a village fountain to which all have recourse in their thirst.”

“A parish should be like a village fountain to which all have recourse in their thirst.”

Pope Francis gets even closer to this vision when he says, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, that he hopes a parish will be “a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey”; “a community with an endless desire to show mercy.” (28)

If Francis gave us the image *Oases of Mercy*, it was Blessed John Henry Newman who inspired the idea of *Radiating Christ*.

It comes from a poem of his, *Radiating Christ*, which we shall hear shortly.

Newman was one of the greatest intellects of 19th century England.

He made the journey from Anglican ministry to becoming a Catholic – first a Catholic layman, then a priest and eventually Cardinal.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI beatified him when he visited England in 2010.

Radiating Christ I find so striking that I believe it bears hearing in full:

“Dear Jesus, help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.

Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.

Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of Yours.

Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus!

Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine, so to shine as to be a light to others.

The light, O Jesus, will be all from You; none of it will be mine: it will be You shining on others through me.

Let me thus praise You in the way You love best: by shining on those around me.

Let me preach You without preaching, not by words, but by my example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to You. Amen.

These words are powerful in themselves.

I think they derive particular force from the fact that they're a prayer.

The fact that Newman offers them in worship to the Lord emphasises his belief that it's only with the Lord's help that we can begin to communicate Christ to others.

1. PARISHES RADIATING CHRIST

The reason I start in this way is that I'm convinced that the way to set England and New Zealand ablaze is to make of our parishes oases of mercy which radiate Christ. Pope Francis is clear that we're about radiating Christ.

Because, as he says, the face of God is Mercy; and Christ is that face.

When he calls us to be missionary disciples, he explains that means to be "missionaries of mercy".

In order for parishes to be truly missionary, he believes they need to rethink their approach: rethink the goals, structures, style and methods they employ to be more missionary.

I believe the rich young man of Matthew's Gospel can help us here, with his question, "What more must I do?" (19, 20)

Because this is the question we're being asked to consider by Pope Francis in each and every parish: "What more must I do?"

Already, Pope St John Paul had urged us to "put out into the deep" at the start of the new millennium.

And I'm sure you responded with great generosity in your dioceses and parishes.

Then Pope Francis came calling us to embark on another new chapter of evangelization.

The way he expresses it is that he asks each particular church to undertake "a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform." (EG 30)

He makes clear in the opening sentences of *Evangelii Gaudium* that this is about creating “new paths for the Church’s journey in years to come.” (1)
To anyone who’s tempted to say, “But we’ve always done it this way” (EG 33), he begs them to think again; to put out into the deep once more.

In saying this, he’s simply building on the message of his three predecessors. It’s often said the first charter of the New Evangelization was *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, produced by Blessed Pope Paul VI in 1975. Pope Paul didn’t refer to a New Evangelization as such.

But he prepared the way for it by saying the “the Church ... exists in order to evangelize”.

And that “it is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent.” (14)

It’s significant to note the stress he laid on witness: “Modern man listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” (41)

He echoed Blessed John Henry Newman by describing the powerful witness of Christians who “radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine.” (21)

He stressed the need also to proclaim Christ by word, saying, “There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.” (22)

Pope St John Paul II was the first actually to coin the term New Evangelization. He revisited it with increasing urgency; and made it clear this newness he envisaged as triple in character: new in ardour; new in methods, and new in expression.

He affirmed the dual thrust of Evangelization identified by Pope Paul, that's to say the need to proclaim Christ both in deed and word.

“The witness of a Christian life,” he said in *The Mission of the Redeemer*, “is the first and irreplaceable form of mission.” (42)

Pope Benedict XVI gave the New Evangelization increased dynamism through his establishment in 2011 of a New Council for the Promoting of the New Evangelization.

He affirmed the conviction of his two predecessors that Evangelization is an expression of the Church's very nature.

In all three Popes, one sees an increasing clarity about the different contexts for Evangelization too – that there are three distinct groups of people all needing Evangelization.

Before 1975, the Church tended to think in terms of an Evangelization known traditionally as an Evangelization *Ad Gentes*, an Evangelization to people who haven't heard of Christ.

The call for New Evangelization arises from a growing awareness that Christians themselves – both practising and no longer practising – are all in need of Evangelization too:

active Catholics, who need their faith to be renewed; inactive members whose faith needs strengthening; and a huge mass of the unchurched.

Evangelization of these three categories is sometimes expressed as a call to:

- (a) inflame the hearts of those who already come;
- (b) learn how to reach those in the community who no longer come;
- (c) reach out to those who have never come.

Put even more succinctly, it's about proclaiming Christ:

- (a) to those who've been initiated into a relationship with Christ and adhere;
- (b) to those who've been initiated and don't adhere;
- (c) to those who haven't met Christ.

Pope Francis located himself directly in this tradition by choosing to name his first encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Choosing a name so similar to and obviously resonating with *Evangelii Nuntiandi* was itself a statement that Pope Francis saw himself as building on the tradition which had developed since.

This is affirmed by his categorical statement in the first pages of *Evangelii Gaudium* that “the new evangelization is a summons addressed to all and ... it is carried out in three principal settings ... the area of ordinary pastoral ministry ... (the) area ... of ‘the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism’ ... lastly ... preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him.” (15)

That’s to say proclamation:

(a) to those who’ve been initiated into a relationship with Christ and adhere;

(b) to those who’ve been initiated but don’t adhere;

(c) to those who haven’t met Christ.

Pope Francis is also at pains, throughout *Evangelii Gaudium*, to stress that Evangelization takes place at every stage of faith development.

What is new in *Evangelii Gaudium* is the stress on strategy.

Pope St John Paul had called for an Evangelization new in ardour; new in methods, and new in expression.

He was saying it’s not just about having a vision; it’s about being strategic.

He would have applauded the quote of Fr James Mallon says, in his excellent book *Divine Renovation*, where he says “vision without strategy is hallucination”!

Mallon himself doesn’t know where the phrase comes from.

But I agree with him that it captures the spirit and essence of *Evangelii Gaudium* – that “vision without strategy is hallucination”.

2. RESOLUTE PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT

Being strategic doesn’t mean parishes starting from scratch, though.

In most parishes, there’s already a great deal going on which is evangelizing.

Part of what we should be about in this “resolute process of discernment” is to celebrate what we already do; but then to ask what more the Lord may be calling us to do in the light of *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Where I come from, parishes have found it helpful to review their evangelizing activity under four headings: Prayer, Caritas, Faith Formation, and Marriage & Family Life.

Simply to ask themselves: if, for instance, prayer is our parish’s gift, how might we deepen the parish’s prayer-life and somehow un-tap its evangelizing potential? Our Masses may be good but we may have lost sight of what Pope Francis calls popular piety.

By popular piety, he means popular devotions like processions and praying the rosary.

We need to give deep consideration to how we meet the prayer-needs of our youth – to ask ourselves, “Do we need to invest more resources in Children’s Liturgy of the Word and Masses for Young People? Do we need to invest in employing Youth leaders?”

Ask yourselves what you do well; and what more, in the light of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Lord may be asking of you.

Ask yourselves the same questions with regard to what you do in the parish under the other headings of Caritas, Faith Formation, of Marriage & Family Life.

Taking Caritas, for example, (‘Caritas’ means charity, charitable outreach) your parish may be strong in its care for the elderly, in organising food for the hungry but may have given little energy to the inclusion of people with disabilities, to catechesis for people with learning disabilities, to access for those who are physically disabled. You may feel the time is ripe to explore the possibility of setting up a *Faith and Light* group for families of People with Learning Disabilities; organizing signing for deaf people at Mass; organizing better disabled access.

Take stock.

Ask yourselves what you do well already; and what more, in the light of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Lord may be asking of you.

To these four categories – of Prayer, Caritas, Faith Formation, and Marriage & Family Life - I would suggest adding a fifth, namely, new Evangelistic Outreach. This I add because there’ll always be a danger that parishes evangelize inwardly without looking outside of themselves sufficiently.

Recent research in England and Wales suggests that the majority of converts to Catholicism already have a Christian background.

It may be the same in New Zealand.

We need to ask where we need to go to meet those who haven't yet met Christianity at all.

Some of you may have experience of *Night Fever*, which is literally about standing on the highways and byways near your church and inviting people into your church. It may be that the place to start is with a Welcoming Group to give a deep welcome to those who do cross the threshold of the parish.

Meanwhile consideration needs to be given to how the parish reaches out to those who come nowhere near the threshold.

Once you've discerned and agreed your Evangelizing Initiatives for the next three years or so, decide which activity you'll pursue over the course of the next eighteen months to two years in support of your parish's mission.

This way you won't be overwhelmed by novelty but, at the same time, you'll have a sense of where you want, as a parish, to be getting to next.

3. FORMING EVANGELIZATION TEAMS

This whole process of discernment presumes you have a group to lead it.

We discuss/ed the make-up of such a group in our workshop on Forming Evangelization Teams.

The discernment about Evangelization in the parish can begin either before or after you form a Parish Evangelization Team.

But to have a Team is essential.

Pope Francis is clear about this, when he says, in EG: "A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory ... The important thing is not to walk alone but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and pastoral discernment." (33)

We should remember, the Lord himself needed a team to help him carry out his mission.

Like his, ours should be, ideally, about twelve: this leaves you room to retain a critical mass even if some withdraw from the group.

Prayer is essential before choosing the group; and once the group is chosen. They need all to be people for whom prayer is at the heart of their lives.

The priest should most certainly be a member of the group but doesn't need necessarily to lead it.

The Team should represent the diversity of the parish – the diversity of ages, occupations, ethnicity and everything in between.

Belonging to the team should be their main parish role – not just an additional one.

It doesn't mean the Team-members will be the evangelizers: the purpose of the team is to help the parish be mission-focused; sometimes the Team is described as the “mission conscience” of the parish.

Theirs it will be to discern new Evangelizing Initiatives for the next three years or so; and to come up with strategies to resource them.

For this they'll need formation and clear terms of reference.

4. THE MEANING OF EVANGELIZATION

This whole process of discernment to which Pope Francis calls parishes will lead them almost inevitably to ask themselves, “What exactly do we mean by evangelization?”

I would always want to stress that everyone is entitled to express it in their own way.

You know, it says in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “There are as many ways of praying as there are people who pray.” (2664)

Well, it's the same for Evangelization.

I like to suggest that Evangelization is, at heart, about the communication of a relationship, a relationship with Christ – in word and deed and in such a way that causes people to ask, “Who is this Jesus whom you love and worship?”

communication of a relationship

communication of a relationship with Christ

in word and deed

in such a way that causes people to ask, “Who is this Jesus whom you love and worship?”

Bishop Robert Barron says someone criticized Christianity for being a personality cult.

He replied by saying, “Well, that’s precisely what it is: the cult of Jesus Christ.”

When Bishop Barron describes the characteristics of a New Evangelizer, he says an Evangelizer is someone who’s not just a worshipper but is in love with Jesus Christ. And what they’re about is nothing less than “Christifying the world”, as the 2nd Vatican Council charged us to do.

This is where the Pope Francis’s stress on Mercy is such a gift to us.

Because mercy acts like a lens through which to make our Evangelizing endeavours Christifying, Christocentric.

If we proclaim mercy we proclaim Christ.

It is striking the force with which Pope Francis urges upon us both the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy.

He warns us they’re actually the criteria upon which we will be judged.

And, saying this, he urges us not to “forget the words of St John of the Cross, that ‘As we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love’; (that) ‘as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of (them)’.”

5. THE CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY

Just to remind ourselves what the Corporal Works are:

- Feeding the hungry
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Welcoming the stranger

- Clothing the naked
- Caring for the sick
- Visiting those in prison
- Burying the dead.

Before we consider how we harness these to our discernment of Evangelizing Initiatives, it’s important just to note the context into which Pope Francis places them.

One story more than any other seems, to me, to capture the spirit of the Corporal Works of Mercy.

It's the story of the Good Samaritan.

Pope Francis is keen on this story too.

He urges us to recall that Jesus told that story in response to a question.

It was the question of the lawyer who dared to ask, "Who is my neighbour?"

Pope Francis says Jesus is wanting us to understand that our neighbour isn't just someone in a far-off land; our neighbour is more often the person we meet close at hand and whom we find to be in need.

It's no coincidence that, when we study the literal meaning of mercy, we find it means having a heart for the poor.

We learn this from Cardinal Kasper who reminds us that both St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas point out that the Latin word for mercy, "misericordia", means precisely that: having a heart (cor) for the poor (miseri): "Misericordia", mercy.

Cardinal Kasper explains this more fully by going on to say that mercy isn't just affective but also effective; that's to say, it seeks to relieve the plight of the poor. All of this needs to inform our discernment of how to make our parishes oases of mercy, places which have a heart for the poor.

In terms of how we harness the Works of Mercy to our discernment of Evangelizing Initiatives, I suggest this can be quite straightforward.

For instance, we may take for consideration the category of Marriage & Family Life. We should simply ask ourselves, what do we do well already in this area; then what more may the Lord be calling us to do in the light of *Evangelii Gaudium*?

Having done this, then to take prayerfully the Works of Mercy and ask what more we might do in the light of these – can lead to all sorts of possibilities.

6. HOW TO TEACH THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

The United States' Bishop Conference website gives us a taste of what we might come up with.

It has several very down-to-earth and feasible ideas, in a section titled, "How to teach the New Evangelization".

It takes each of the Corporal Works.

Under Visit the Sick, for example, it has several suggestions:

- Give blood.

- Spend time volunteering at a nursing home. Get creative and make use of your talents.
- Take time on a Saturday to stop and visit with an elderly neighbour.
- Offer to assist caregivers or chronically sick family members on a one-time or periodic basis.
- Give caregivers time off from their caregiving responsibilities so they can rest, complete personal chores, or enjoy a relaxing break.
- Next time you make a meal that can be easily frozen, make a double batch and give it to a family in your parish who have a sick loved one.

You can see immediately the relevance for Marriage & Family Life.

Doubtless, families in some of your parishes are doing a number of these things already.

But a systematic review of how we might organize ourselves as a parish to help many more families take up such ideas could lead to a much louder proclamation of mercy.

7. VISITING MR FLOOD

My father showed me at an early age how such acts of mercy can become an ordinary part of family life.

And, by the way, I take no credit for this story since I was simply doing as I was told. My Dad was a schoolteacher and, in those days, he taught on a Saturday morning as well as Monday to Friday.

Then, on his return from Saturday school, and before going off to referee rugby, he'd say to me, "Come on, Nick, get the shepherd's pie"; and we'd take it down the road to Mr Flood, me sitting in the front of the car with a hot pie balanced precariously on my lap.

Mr Flood lived in the barest flat I've ever seen – either then or since.

But his smile filled it.

And we used to look out for that smile as he sat, day in day out, at his window, waiting to give me and my brothers the heartiest of waves as we wended our way to and from the sweet shop!

I realise now that he radiated Christ.

Of course, it's only the Lord who knows the number of families in your parishes who are meeting Christ in similar ways through living out such Corporal Works of Mercy. They'll tell you, if you ask, that they receive much more than they give to such lonely housebound people.

What Pope Francis is saying is, “Yes, of course; so let’s do more of it”; “Let’s organize ourselves to do more.”

8. L’ARCHE

Viewing our Evangelizing work through the lens of these Works reminds us Evangelization doesn’t need to be difficult.
You can begin to evangelize just by doing it.

I learnt this from getting to know the communities of L’Arche founded by Jean Vanier.

He says the best way to proclaim mercy is just to start doing it.
Jean was the son of Georges Vanier, Governor-General of Canada.

But, at the age of fifteen, Jean felt called to cross the Atlantic to join the Royal Navy.
After ten years in the Navy, he left to study Philosophy at the Sorbonne.

He soon began teaching Philosophy.

It was while teaching that he met a priest who took him to meet some men he had befriended in the local psychiatric hospital.

It was an asylum.

As he got to know these men, Jean began to feel a deep call within him to share his life with them.

He bought a little house which he called *L’Arche*, the Ark, Noah’s Ark.

And he gave a home to two men with significant learning disabilities called Raphael and Philippe.

It’s interesting to hear Jean say he had no idea whatsoever that he was starting a movement.

Now there are L’Arche communities in 58 countries across the globe and spanning every continent.

All he knew was that he was doing something irrevocable.

He began by just doing it.

He often says the easiest way to start evangelizing is just by doing it.

The vision of L’Arche, the heart of L’Arche, is, he says, to be found in words we find in the Gospel of Luke.

“Jesus said to his host: ‘When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not ask your friends, brothers, relations or rich neighbours, for fear they repay your courtesy by inviting you in return. No; when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; that they cannot pay you back means that you are fortunate, because repayment will be made to you when the virtuous rise again.’” (14, 12-14)

A few moments later, Jean comments on that text.

And he says something which is important for us to hear.

He reminds us that Jesus says, “Do this and you will be blessed.”

Jesus doesn’t say they will be blessed.

He says you will be blessed.

Why? Because, in the poor person to whom you give a welcome, you welcome Jesus.

After all, Jesus said, did he not, “I was hungry and you gave me to eat; sick and you visited me”?

Words which are echoed powerfully by Pope Francis when he says, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, when you reach out to the poor, you touch the wounded body of Christ. He says, “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.” (EG 24)

In other words, you meet Christ, as well as proclaiming Christ.

You meet Christ and proclaim Christ.

I say that.

But when I reflect on all of those years of Dad and me taking shepherd’s pie to Mr Flood, I wonder if he even knew we were Christian?

I believe we met Christ in Mr Flood and that he met Christ in us.

But it seems a shame we never spoke to him about our faith.

It takes us back to that earlier question of what Evangelization is about.

If it’s about communication of a relationship in word and deed, don’t we need to focus a little more on the words too?

Pope Francis is keen for us to take this on board.

That’s why he gives a significant part of *Evangelii Gaudium* to discussion of how we communicate who we understand Jesus to be.

Telling people who the Lord is for us is vital, too, if we wish to be parishes which radiate Christ.

I don't believe we even said grace with Mr Flood.
I would now.
I'd begin with that; and see his reaction.
What I'd say next would depend on the way he responded.
If he joined in, I might ask him if he'd like to pray a little more.
If he didn't join in, I might ask him if he minded us praying.
Either way, we could begin a gentle conversation – never to proselytize – but to lovingly enquire and perhaps provoke questions.

9. SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY

It's very striking, in this context, to hear what Francis has to say about the Spiritual Works of Mercy specifically.

Because they're principally about expressing our faith in words.
Just to remind ourselves again of what they are:

- Instructing
- Advising
- Consoling
- Comforting
- Forgiving
- Bearing wrongs patiently.

Reflecting on all of these, Pope Francis speaks very strongly.

He issues words of warning:

“We will be asked,” he says, “if we have helped others escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness;

if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty;

if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence;

if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer.”

Helped others escape doubt
Helped overcome ignorance
Been close to the lonely and afflicted
Forgiven those who offended us
Rejected all forms of anger and hate
Had the kind of patience God shows
Commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord

What we’re being asked to realise is that we shall be selling the Works of Mercy short if we focus only on deed; we need also to focus on word – including our telling people who we believe the Lord to be.

Successive Popes, from Paul VI to Francis, have been clear about this.

Pope Francis reaffirms what we heard Pope Paul say forty years earlier: “There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.” (EN 22)

10. THE KERYGMA

The Popes use that word “proclaimed” deliberately.

Because it’s the word they used in the first years of the Church.

The actual word they used was kerygma.

Because kerygma means proclamation.

Pope Francis sums up this kerygma succinctly and powerfully.

He likes to call it the core proclamation; and he explains what it is: that it’s simply telling people, “Jesus loves you; his self-emptying death on the cross saves you from selfishness and sin; now he walks with you every day.” (EG 164)

“Jesus loves you; his self-emptying death on the cross saves you from selfishness and sin; now he walks with you every day.”

He makes it even simpler sometimes – saying that all we need to proclaim is that “Jesus loves you ... (and) walks with you every day.” (EG 164).

This we need to hold onto, as we reflect on the evangelizing needs here in 21st century New Zealand, that the key to evangelization is proclaiming who Jesus is for you in a way which leads others into a relationship with him; the key to evangelization is proclaiming who Jesus is for you in a way which leads others into a relationship with him.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI put this beautifully when he told the Bishops of the Philippines: “Your great task in Evangelization is ... to propose a personal relationship with Christ as the key to personal fulfilment.”

Those words are no less true for us than for the Bishops: our great task (too) in Evangelization is ... to propose a personal relationship with Christ as the key to personal fulfilment.

In other words, to announce the kerygma.

If “kerygma” is a new term for us, we shouldn’t be at all put off by it: as I say, it simply means “proclamation”, the proclamation of who Jesus is – the core message of the Gospels.

This core proclamation is what Peter and then Paul were about as they sought, in the time immediately after the Ascension, to help people understand who Jesus of Nazareth was.

It’s what we find Peter explaining so movingly to the men of Israel when he stands up in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and tells them:

“Men of Israel, listen to what I am going to say: Jesus the Nazarene was a man commended to you by God by the miracles and portents and signs that God worked through him when he was among you, as you know. This man ... you took and had crucified and killed ... But God raised him to life ... Now raised to the heights by God’s right hand, he has received from the Father the Holy Spirit, who was promised, and what you see and hear is the outpouring of that Spirit.” (Acts 2, 22-24 etc)

They were professing their profound conviction, which is ours also, that Jesus who’d been put to death now lives and is present to us through the power of the Holy Spirit whom he has poured into our hearts.

11. OPPORTUNITIES FOR KERYGMA

The question is how to begin to share this core message with people.

Sometimes, the opportunity presents itself to us by surprise.

The years I was living in Rome, I had two experiences of this.

The first was when I was asked to look after three young women – the daughter of a family friend and her two girl-friends.

They were all 19.

I was taking them into St Peter's Basilica when I thought I'd better just check how much they knew.

As we crossed St Peter's Square, I reminded them about Peter's relationship with the Lord; how, in spite of Peter denying him, Jesus made him leader of the disciples; how it was Peter who was one of the first to find the tomb empty; after the Resurrection, the Risen Lord spent forty more days with his friends and made it clear that Peter was to be shepherd of the flock; after the Ascension, Peter preached first in Jerusalem then eventually came to Rome, preached there for decades and was finally arrested and martyred there in Nero's Circus.

We reached the *Confessio* at the centre of the basilica just as I got to telling of his death; and I was able to say, "And this is where he was buried. Right under this altar: three altars down".

One of the girls had tears in her eyes and said, "I just don't understand why no one's ever told me this. How come I've never heard this? I wish I'd known it before!"

She was bright; they were all going to either Oxford or Cambridge; she'd been to a Christian school but this was a revelation to her.

I also wondered why no one had ever told her.

A few months later we entertained the English World Cup rugby team - the ones who did rather well in a certain rugby match over in Australia in 2004!

One of their number couldn't resist having a go on the College organ.

When they heard the sound of his playing coming from the church, other players came in.

They began to look at the frescoes of martyrs from the time of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.

Soon they asked me, "What are these?"

I told them the story of our martyrs' heroism: how they refused to be part of a Church which broke with Rome; and were prepared to go all the way to death for the sake of Catholic truth.

And one of them, perhaps the toughest of the bunch, looked at me, with very moist eyes, and said, "I don't understand why no one's ever told us this before. This is all news to me."

How many of our own young people would say the same: “You never told us. There’s so much about Jesus and our history that no one ever told us”

12. KERYGMATIC CATECHESIS

We needn’t be downhearted – but it should be a wake-up call to us: to wake up to the need constantly to revisit this core proclamation in our catechesis and preaching.

Fr James Mallon, in his excellent book, *Divine Renovation*, is clear about this: “This proclamation,” he says, “ought (actually) to be present in every homily, in every class and in every talk”.

He means we should be making the story of who Jesus is and how others have testified to that a part of all the conversations we have with those we’re catechizing – whatever their age or stage of faith.

He’s simply echoing Pope Francis, who says, “the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you’.” (EG 164)

Since I began this episcopal ministry, I’ve had the joy of meeting a lot of young people preparing for Confirmation.

And I’ve come to realise how easy it is to proclaim the kerygma to them.

In meetings with them and in preaching to them, I talk with them about the promises they’re going to make.

But I don’t just talk about the fact that these are promises which their parents and godparents made on their behalf and which they now make for themselves.

I also tell them, and this is the kerygmatic part, when you make these promises, you’re saying you believe Jesus is who he says he is.

You’re saying you believe he was God made human; that he was a historical person; that he grew up in Nazareth; that, at about the age of thirty, he was anointed by the Holy Spirit and began a ministry of teaching and preaching and healing; he worked many miracles which proved he was divine; but, after three years, his people rejected him; they had him put to death by crucifixion.

But he rose from the dead.

When he returned to the Father, he sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples.

And it’s this same Holy Spirit who comes upon you and leads you into the fullness of life.

Now, that's the kerygma, the core proclamation.

It's what we mean by kerygmatic catechesis.

And it should be part of all the catechesis we do.

It should be part of the discussion we have not just in RCIA – if we discuss these things at all; and we certainly should – but in all sorts of other catechetical moments: when we meet with parents who are asking for their child's baptism, when we prepare children and adults for their child's 1st Eucharist; in marriage preparation.

Dare to ask, "When we profess the Creed at Mass on Sunday, do you believe in everything we say there; or are there some parts you wonder about, would like to discuss, know more about?"

After all, if we can't talk about these things in formal catechesis, then when can we?

It's what Pope Francis means when he says we need to revisit this core message at all different stages of faith development.

In this, he's only reiterating what the *General Directory for Catechesis* said nearly twenty years before him – that catechesis, at all stages of faith development, needs to be evangelizing.

We begin by revisiting the core proclamation: communicating a relationship, a relationship with Christ – in word and deed and in such a way as makes people ask, "Who is this Jesus whom you love and worship?"

13. CHANGING THE WORLD

I'd like to finish with something I learnt in my first parish.

Soon after I arrived, I saw a poster at the back of the church.

It said simply this: "Ever thought of changing the world one heart at a time?"

It was an invitation to join a community which welcomed some of the most marginalized of people.

Changing the world one heart at a time.

Because one heart at a time is how Jesus began when he called Matthew and James and John and Peter and Andrew to be his disciples.

One heart at a time is how he first spoke to the heart of each one of us here.

One heart at a time was how my Dad taught me we proclaim mercy to Mr Flood.

I do believe it's one heart at a time that we begin to radiate Christ – showing every person whom we encounter not just that our parish is an oasis of mercy but that they'll find an oasis of mercy in us, in each of us.

I think this picture says even better what I mean.

We may like just to contemplate this image for a few ten seconds.

It's significant the Pope says he had no idea whether the man he embraced was contagious.

He just wanted to embrace him.

Jean Vanier had no idea how embracing Raphael and Philippe would work out.

You don't arrive at that sort of spontaneous generosity by accident.

It's because you've been evangelized yourself.

And that comes from years of meeting the Lord daily in prayer.

Then you begin to radiate Christ.

It's where we need start too: on our knees.

This is where evangelization begins: in prayer; on our knees.

If more and more people in our community are doing the same, giving themselves daily both to the Lord in prayer and giving themselves daily to their neighbour

through acts of generosity, self-sacrifice, charity and loving-kindness –

then, little by little, our parishes *will* become something like what St John XXIII and now Pope Francis were hoping they might be

- oases of mercy which radiate Christ, beacons of light which put fire into our hearts and the hearts of those who behold them.

In short, we'll find our parishes become missionary in ways we never imagined possible.