

The church in these times....

The Catholic church has twelve hundred million members. Of these, 40% live in Latin America although the churches of Latin America continue to hemorrhage members to Pentecostal churches. 23% live in Europe and declining; 16% in Africa and 11% in Asia. Other countries including the US make up the remaining 10% of which we in Oceania represent less than 1% (.08%).

There is extreme diversity of every kind within the church including political, economic, cultural, sexual and theological. We are emerging from a period where the reforms of Vatican 2 were stalled, and corruption in the Vatican and sexual abuse and cover up by clergy and bishops has created a crisis of credibility especially in Western countries. Had not Pope Francis emerged, the decline in affiliation would have been greater. Highlighting modern pluralism, there are many Catholics who claim Francis is misguided and leading the church to ruin. For those seeking certainty and an emphasis on tradition, a Pope like Francis is a great disappointment.

In Europe, there has been a church decline of 15% since 1970, and we know only too well, that participation of younger families in parish life throughout New Zealand has declined significantly in the past fifteen years, and that decline is accelerating. Less than 50% of Kiwis now classify themselves as Christians according to the 2013 census, and 40% regard themselves as atheists. This is the world in which we live and in which our Passionist Family Groups strive to meet the aims and goals of the Movement.

Pope Francis' priorities

Pope Francis deplores the careerism of clerics and the rigidity and legalism many church leaders have exhibited. He has called for a year of mercy. He is a champion of the poor and knows first hand the pain of their plight. We are experiencing a serious intent on his part to reinvent the church – as a gospel community, committed to the fundamentals of mission, concern for the poor, the environment, the divorced, gay and those of other faiths. It almost surprises us that these are mostly the issues that Jesus preached and instructed about.

The way it was

Fifty years ago, the mission of the church was generally understood as, 'save your soul, and save others' souls'. The focus was on "salvation" which Protestants interpreted as "believe and be saved", and Catholics interpreted as "repent, confess your sins and receive holy communion". The most important actions were to 'hear' or attend Sunday Mass and to avoid mortal sin so as to stay (and die) in the 'state of grace'.

If you did this, you could look forward to receiving the reward of going to heaven rather than hell, most likely after a time spent in purgatory! This emphasis began to change after Vatican 2 and some powerful documents were issued by that Council and by the various Popes since, highlighting human dignity and the demands of social justice, engagement with the world, ecumenism and care for the earth.

A Pastoral approach

Pope Francis has applied his teaching in a very pastoral way, despite various opponents among the cardinals, bishops, priests and laity. The 2015 Synod on the family highlighted this opposition, and we can expect Francis to issue a pastoral response to the questions raised at the Synod, rather than what others point out cannot be done – make a change in doctrine.

Speaking about the Synod on the family, Francis said the Synod had *"laid bare the closed hearts which frequently hide even behind the church's teachings and good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families."* He added that, *"The synod experience also made us better realize that the true defenders of doctrine are not those who uphold its letter, but its spirit; not ideas but people; not formulas but the free availability of God's love and forgiveness."*

In November 2015 he said, *"If a pope doesn't act like a bishop, if a pope doesn't act like a priest, doesn't act like a pastor, he will be a very intelligent person, very important, will have much influence in society, but I think -- I think! -- that in his heart he is not happy."* The clues to his pastoral approach are in his statements and homilies. Perhaps the most famous was his response to a question about gay priests, was, *"If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will Who am I to judge?"* To Argentine pilgrims to World Youth Day, *"I want to see the church get closer to the people. I want to get rid of clericalism, the mundane, this closing ourselves off within ourselves, in our parishes, schools or structures"*.

Cardinal Martini

In August 2012, two weeks before his death, Jesuit Cardinal Carlo Martini said, *"The Church is 200 years out of date and in need of a radical transformation. The child sex scandals oblige us to undertake a journey of transformation. Catholics lack confidence in the church. Our culture has grown old, our churches are big and empty and the church bureaucracy rises up, our religious rites and the vestments we wear are pompous."* He added that *"unless the church adopts a more generous attitude towards divorced persons, it will lose the allegiance of future generations.* Martini commented, *"A woman is abandoned by her husband and finds a new companion to look after her and her children. A second love succeeds. If this family is discriminated against, not just the mother will be cut off but also her children." In this way "the church loses the future generation"*

Internal and external challenges

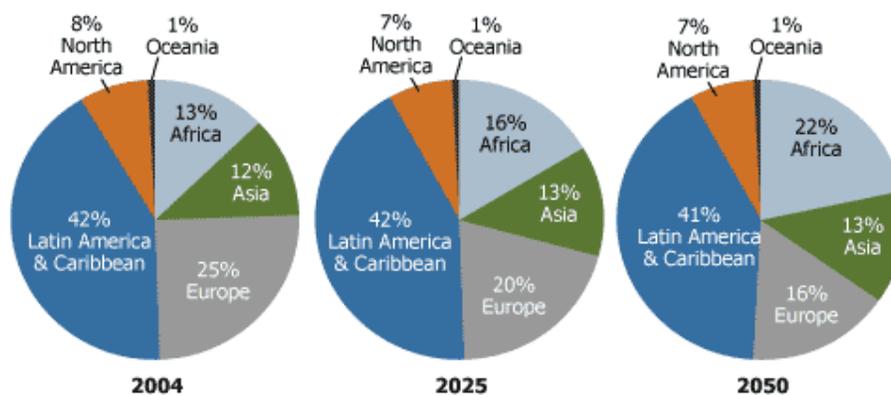
There are internal and external challenges for the church and its members, and Pope Francis offers hope for both. Issues such as Vatican corruption and clerical sexual abuse and cover ups need urgent and radical attention. So too, do many pastoral issues related to the divorced and remarried and the availability of priests. To a large extent we have to wait for action in these areas, but the external challenges are real for each of us and they are something we can strive to address – now.

Only one in seven Australians who call themselves Christians, regularly attend a church and most church attendees are over 60 years of age. Local clergy are aged and declining in numbers. In 2013, 33% of parishes shared a priest (90% increase in 3 years). Some priests look after three or more parishes. The church in New Zealand reflects these same realities.

We are propping up a structure that needs a major overhaul. Some suggest that many Catholics “have been sacramentalised, but not evangelised”. They have not been led to a true faith encounter and there is an increased awareness that our religious language is out of kilter with scientific discovery.

The younger generations shop around with the help of Google, smartphones and other IT devices and mix and match when they go shopping. They are doing this with religion. They question and don't accept ‘the whole package’, neither do they readily make a commitment to any institution. Many have never been introduced to a local religious community other than their school nor had the example or influence of church-belonging parents. Some of them are attracted to evangelical and Pentecostal churches which are generally non-dogmatic and less institutionalized. Their worship is more emotive with an emphasis on music, and members choose their church rather than being ‘forced’ to belong.

Evangelical churches stress personal conversion, a commitment to Jesus, preaching the gospel and scripture as the sole basis for faith. These same churches attract people in poorer countries which at present have 70% of the Catholic population.



In 1978 Latin American bishops warned that 2,000 Catholics were leaving the church every day. They now have 42% of the world's Catholics but only 18% of the world's priests. Endorsement of the charismatic movement has led to an increasing proportion of their membership among Latin American Catholics. Between 1900 and 1960, 90% of Latin Americans were Catholics. By 2013 they had reduced to 69%. 85% of Protestants in Colombia today were baptised Catholic and 65% of Latin American Protestants are Pentecostal

Pentecostals have borrowed from local traditions and drawn from their own community rather than import leaders as Catholics have done with priests. Many of the poor are attracted by faith healing and the hope of prosperity (scriptural prosperity preaching). Given these realities and the fact that Pope Francis comes from Latin America, he is addressing issues critical to the church there (and in Africa) – a 'poor' church. When he appeared on the balcony above St Peter's square after his election and asked the people assembled there to bless him, he was criticised in some quarters for being 'pentecostal'.

The church must adapt to a pluralistic world that needs moral guidance, identification with the poor and outreach to those who suffer injustice. When we see cardinals, bishops and bureaucrats at the Vatican more concerned with holding on to power and retaining dogma than focusing on pastoral outreach, it is obvious they are out of step with their church members - and with Jesus?

Pope Francis has said the church is not a museum but a field hospital! Many people sense that they are headed in a different direction from the younger traditional minded priests who will be the Bishops of the future. Remote parishes and dioceses have few priests and dwindling income. The ostrich might have to lift its head from the sand! Do we fear the loss of the museum or are we excited about creating a field hospital?

A new sense of mission and what it means

The mission of the church is expressed in very clear language today. In fact it is sometimes suggested that instead of saying that the church has a mission, it might be better stated that the mission has a church. In that way, we can more easily identify what the church needs to be focused on. We can say that we are called to share the Good News of the all inclusive 'Kingdom' of all people and all peoples. Our urgency is as much for here on Earth as it is in Heaven. This kingdom of one of love, joy, peace and justice. The Church must extend mercy and compassion and be a family for all.

Pope Francis asked *"How can it be not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?"* By asking such a question Francis reminds us (the church) that we have a mission, and every member is confronted by his challenges. In his homily at Lampedusa in July 2013 following the deaths of migrants seeking to make their way to Italy, Francis said, *"So many of us, even including myself, are disoriented, we are no longer attentive to the world in which we live, we don't care, we don't*

protect that which God has created for all, and we are unable to care for one another. And when this disorientation assumes worldwide dimensions, we arrive at tragedies like the one we have seen.

Today no one in the world feels responsible for this; we have lost the sense of fraternal responsibility; we have fallen into the hypocritical attitude of the priest and of the servant of the altar that Jesus speaks about in the parable of the Good Samaritan: We look upon the brother half dead by the roadside, perhaps we think "poor guy," and we continue on our way, it's none of our business; and we feel fine with this. In this world of globalization we have fallen into a globalization of indifference. We are accustomed to the suffering of others, it doesn't concern us, it's none of our business".

The sense of global solidarity that Francis reminds us of, addresses such contemporary issues as the misery of the poor, the injustice of global wealth structures, welcoming refugees, dialoguing with Muslims, and caring for the earth. These, rather than 'saving my soul' must be the focus of our faith.

One image Pope Francis has used of the church is the field hospital. He said *"I see the Church as a field hospital after a battle. It's pointless to ask a seriously injured patient whether his cholesterol or blood sugar levels are high! It's his wounds that need to be healed. The rest we can talk about later".*

Mission by witness

He has highlighted that evangelization is not proselytizing and that *"proselytism is solemn nonsense; It makes no sense"*. On December 2nd, 2015, Francis said, *"Missionary spirit is manifested by preaching love, humanity and faith through one's witness and not through proselytism. Faith in Jesus Christ is shared first through witness then with words."*

In a morning homily in October 2013, he explained that *"the Christian who would bring the Gospel must listen to everyone! I remember when as a child one would hear in Catholic families, in my family, 'No, we cannot go to their house, because they are not married in the Church, eh!'. It was as an exclusion. No, you could not go! Neither could we go to [the houses of] socialists or atheists. Now, thank God, people do not say such things, right? Such an attitude was a defense of the faith, but it was one of walls: the Lord made bridges"*.

For Francis, the Church's purpose is not to bring God to the world but to emphasize God's presence—already there. In November 2015, Pope Francis advised the national conference of the Italian church *"We are not living an era of change but a change of era. The reform of the church then, and the church is always reforming, does not end in the umpteenth plan to change structures. It means instead grafting yourself to and rooting yourself in Christ, leaving yourself to be guided by the Spirit — so that all will be possible with genius and creativity."*

Mercy

Pope Francis has declared a year of Mercy, so it is important that we appreciate both how we can experience mercy (from God) and how we can extend mercy to others. To really know the power of mercy we have to have experienced receiving it. The most common way for most of us is through an act of forgiveness either from God, a parent or friend. Francis is inviting us to experience and know God's mercy.

Writing in NCR on December 17th, 2015, Jesuit Fr Thomas Reece said, *"It is very easy for us in the contemporary world to psychologize away our sinfulness by understanding that we are shaped by our heritage and our environment, which is the way I would describe Original Sin. We can neither take all the credit for our achievements nor all the blame for our failures"*. Reece continued, *"Once I had a better understanding of my sins, I realized they are so deeply imbedded in me that I will never get rid of them. It will be a lifelong struggle which I will not win. At that point, I was finally ready for God's mercy because I finally had to acknowledge that I could not save myself. "This is who I am God, take it or leave it." And God took it. In the year of mercy, we are all called to look into our hearts and recognize our sinfulness and our need for God's mercy. But this is not a year of sad reflection on our sinfulness, rather it is a year of rejoicing that God's mercy is gratuitous and overwhelming. Mercy is not earned. It is given"*.

Pope Francis has insisted that the first words of evangelization must be God's love and mercy, not a list of rules and regulations. This is the message that people should hear first and most frequently from priests both in pastoral situations and in preaching. We who have experienced mercy must in turn grant it to others. Addressing the Jesuit Refugee services in 2013, Francis said "Mercy asks us, the church; it asks the institutions — to ensure that no one ever again stand in need of a soup kitchen, of makeshift-lodgings, of a service of legal assistance in order to have his or her legitimate right recognized to live and to work, to be fully a person."

Visiting the war-torn Central African Republic in December 2015, where Muslims and Christian militias have battled in a civil war, Pope Francis insisted that one of the essential characteristics of being a Christian is a love of enemies, *"which protects us from the temptation to seek revenge and from the spiral of endless retaliation. Those who evangelize must therefore be first and foremost practitioners of forgiveness, specialists in reconciliation, experts in mercy, in contrast to those who wield "instruments of death." "This is how we can help our brothers and sisters."*

We know well that the church has promoted the (seven) 'corporal works of mercy - To feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to shelter the homeless; to visit the sick; to visit prisoners and to bury the dead. Most of us learned about these particular actions when we were young, and these exhortations are to be found in Matthew 25:34-40).

They have a profound impact when we consider them in the light of today's world issues, even if those suffering do not always appear on our doorstep. Every parish throughout New Zealand has outreach to the needy ('St Vincent De Paul', 'Care and Concern' etc, and parishioners involved with this wonderful ministry encounter loneliness, poverty, sickness, hunger and homelessness every day. Today, many are also encountering the needs of refugees and migrants struggling to assimilate into society. These needs are less dramatic than those taking dangerous boat trips to find a new life, but they are real situations of need.

Many of these needs are also experienced in various Passionist Family Groups, and more than one parish priest has noted that when PFG's work effectively in a parish there is no need for a bereavement group, hospitality or welcoming group, home or hospital visiting group and several other groups that normally respond to 'corporal acts of mercy' needs that otherwise go unmet.

We must deepen our commitment to seeing this as basic to our aims. In this year of Mercy, we have to seriously ask ourselves whether we are doing enough? It can seem impossible to respond to the needs we read about elsewhere or that we see on television, but there are amazingly generous people who are committed to mercy and compassion and we can be inspired by them to do something practical in our local area, parish and PFG.

Describing the Frances Shelter in Dong Noi Province in Vietnam is difficult. It was founded seventeen years ago by a former St John of God Brother, Bui Van Chau, to provide care for abandoned disabled children and adults. There are no employed staff. A look at this brief video below give some idea of this work. A fuller description of my visit to the Francis Shelter and the work of the Passionist students can be found in Part 2 of 'Vietnam visit' on the NZ PFGM webpage. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJVmNAC6z3Y>

One of the strongest memories of the meaning of mercy that I have is from studying 'The Merchant of Venice'. During Act 1 of Scene 4, Portia pleads for mercy from Skylock and says,

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,
Upon the place beneath.
It is twice blessed.
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
It is mightiest in the mightiest,
It becomes the throned monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
An attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.

But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself.
And earthly power dost thou become likest God's,
Where mercy seasons justice.

Therefore Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice we all must see salvation,
We all do pray for mercy
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy.
I have spoke thus much to mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which if thou dost follow,
This strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence against the merchant there.

Very early in the novel *Les Misérables*, the author, Victor Hugo describes Bishop Muriel's prayerful written entry in a notebook, "Oh, you who are! Ecclesiastes calls you the All-powerful; the Maccabees call you the Creator; the Epistle to the Ephesians calls you liberty; Baruch calls you Immensity; the Psalms call you Wisdom and Truth; John calls you Light; the Books of Kings call you Lord; Exodus calls you Providence; Leviticus, Sanctity; Esdras, Justice; the creation calls you God; man calls you Father; but Solomon calls you Mercy, and that is the most beautiful of all your names."

This foreshadows the major theme of his book. As the story unfolds, Valjean is determined to live a life worthy of the grace he received through the mercy of the bishop. He makes a radical sacrifice of his life for the sake of others. Javert lives with unflinching loyalty to the law. He is so sure he and the law is right he cannot comprehend the idea that an ex-criminal like Valjean could be virtuous. It shatters his entire worldview. Valjean, appreciating his redemption, experiences God's mercy; Javert cannot. It is a classic retelling of Jesus's parables of the tax collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14) and of the prodigal son and the older brother (Luke 15:11–32). It brings to mind Jesus' warning in Matthew 21 that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter heaven before the Pharisees.

Les Misérables contrasts the life of the merciful with the life of the merciless. The merciful face their weakness and are humbled and softened. The merciless become hardened and see only the fault of others. In rejecting mercy they reject Mercy!

We have considered a number of issues:

- Pope Francis' priorities and his pastoral approach
- The way things used to be in the church
- Post Vatican 2 priorities
- Cardinal Martini's challenge
- The younger generation
- Pentecostalism

- A new sense of mission (global solidarity)
- Mission by witness
- Mercy

What this means for PFG's

In an interview on May 17th, 2016, Pope Francis said, "Korea was evangelized by lay people. It is a land of saints and martyrs that now has a strong Church. So there is not necessarily a need for priests in order to evangelize. Baptism provides the strength to evangelize. And the Holy Spirit, received at baptism, prompts one to go out, to take the Christian message with courage and patience. The Holy Spirit is the protagonist of whatever happens in the Church, its motor. Too many Christians are ignorant of this. On the other hand, the opposite danger for the Church is clericalism. This is a sin committed by two parties, like the tango! The priest wants to clericalize lay people and lay people request to be clericalized because it's easier.

In Buenos Aires, I knew many good priests who, whenever they saw a capable lay person, immediately exclaimed "let's make him a deacon!" No, let him remain a lay person. Clericalism is particularly significant in Latin America. If popular piety is strong, it is precisely because it is the only lay initiative that has not been clericalized".

Given that we are in the PFGM are seeking to live out very clear aims and goals, it is vital that we listen to the challenges of Pope Francis who warns, *"We can walk through the deserts of humanity without seeing what is really there; instead, we see what we want to see," he continued. "We are capable of developing views of the world, but we do not accept what the Lord places before our eyes."*

Our motto is "A Family for All". Achieving that motto can be easy if there is no one in our group who is markedly different. Might there be people seeking to belong whom we are slow or reluctant to welcome? Might there be Muslims who would like to belong? Refugees?

Our aims are simple: "To live and love like the early Christians; to share Christian life together; to support one another, especially in times of need; to give example (witness) to others, especially children and to build community in the parish. If we live these goals faithfully we will more easily hear the challenges Pope Francis makes. Then it is a matter of how big our hearts are as to how we respond!

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May, 2016