

“Times have changed”

Since PFG's began in New Zealand in 1988 there have been incredible changes in the way we live. The Berlin wall came down in 1989. Five years later, Apartheid ended in South Africa. These seem now, like long ago events. Our lives have changed radically because of the introduction of new methods of communicating and storing information. We had barely seen the introduction of the CD back in 1988. Now most new vehicles do not include a CD drive. The cassette tape has all but disappeared and digital recording of music means that people carry their music around with them. Large home stereo units have been replaced by small but powerful speakers or headphones using wireless technology. Virtually no one had a personal computer back in 1988. Public access to the internet were unknown, and Google was ten years away from appearing. There were no texts, emails, smartphones, ipads or Facebook.

The way people get together is changing all the time as people complain of being 'time poor'. Texting has replaced a great deal of face-to-face communication and many people including children, spend hours each day buried in a computer, an ipad or a mobile phone.

In 1988, people complained of there being little community in parishes. The Passionist Family Groups were established that year with the promise of being able to change that. In 2016, many New Zealand parishes have a significant percentage of migrants who are not easily included in the social life of their parish. They can find a place in a PFG, but not all of them do so. There is little point in harking back to 'the good old days'. They will not come back. It is valuable then to briefly reflect on some of the effects of change in our world on us, and on our church, our dioceses, parishes and PFG's.

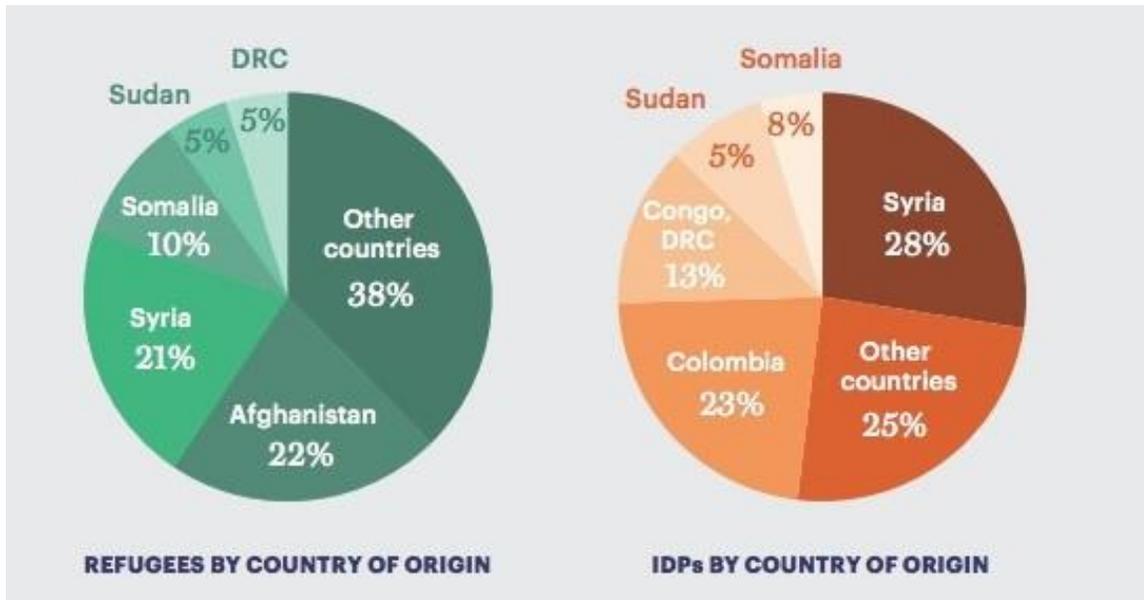
Terrorism

On the world stage, the terrorist attack in the United States, on September 11th, 2001 marked a significant change in world peace. The aggressive response of the US led to a surge of support for fanatical Islamism. The resulting wars have cost more than a quarter of a million lives, created eight million refugees, caused physical and mental illness to millions, cost trillions of dollars and caused mass destruction to landscape and property. It is estimated that the ongoing cost of caring for American soldiers involved in these wars will be as much as US \$950 billion. Living in New Zealand, the threat from terrorism is not nearly as acute as in many other countries. Nevertheless, the threat to security and safety is real.

Refugees

The situation in the Middle East is worse than it was in 2001 and the UN estimates that worldwide, there are 60 million refugees and internally displaced people. It is a challenge for nations to welcome such a huge number of people.

Pope Francis has urged parishes and religious communities to open their doors, reminding them that Christianity has to be lived, not just talked about and celebrated in liturgies.



Migration and radical Islamism are changing Europe and the world in ways we cannot yet imagine. While many refugees have risked their lives to flee warzones, hunger or poverty and arrived in Europe, some countries have started to close their borders, unable to continue taking in such a huge influx of people. Will Europe stay 'moderate' in its response? Will it remain welcoming or will we see millions of people desperate, rejected, with no where to live?

When asked on May 17th 2016, if Europe has the capacity to accept so many migrants, Pope Francis replied, *“One cannot open the gates wide unreasonably. However, the deeper question is why there are so many migrants now. The initial problems are the wars in the Middle East and in Africa as well as the underdevelopment of the African continent, which causes hunger. If there are wars, it is because there exist arms manufacturers – which can be justified for defensive purposes – and above all arms traffickers. If there is so much unemployment, it is because of a lack of investment capable of providing employment, of which Africa has such a great need.*

More generally, this raises the question of a world economic system that has descended into the idolatry of money. The great majority of humanity's wealth has fallen into the hands of a minority of the population.... The worst form of welcome is to 'ghettoize' people. It is necessary to integrate them. In London, the new mayor (Sadiq Khan, the son of Muslim Pakistanis) took his oath of office in a cathedral and will undoubtedly meet the queen. This illustrates the need for Europe to rediscover its capacity to integrate”.

Islamism

For us living so far away from the Middle East and Africa, the situation is extremely complex and the challenge to respond is real. Behind the story of refugees is the great fear of terrorism incited in particular by ISIS. We know that the radicalization and extremism of Islam has created genuine fear and incited anti-Muslim feeling in many countries. Islamism, is to be feared but Islam is not.

In the same May 17th 2016 interview, Pope Francis said, "Today, I don't think that there is a fear of Islam as such but of ISIS and its war of conquest, which is partly drawn from Islam. It is true that the idea of conquest is inherent in the soul of Islam. However, it is also possible to interpret the objective in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus sends his disciples to all nations, in terms of the same idea of conquest.

In the face of Islamic terrorism, it would therefore be better to question ourselves about the way in an overly Western model of democracy has been exported to countries such as Iraq, where a strong government previously existed. Or in Libya, where a tribal structure exists. We cannot advance without taking these cultures into account. As a Libyan said recently, "We used to have one Gaddafi, now we have fifty."

Ultimately, co-existence between Christians and Muslims is still possible. I come from a country where they co-habit on good terms. Muslims come to venerate the Virgin Mary and St George. Similarly, they tell me that for the Jubilee Year Muslims in one African country formed a long queue at the cathedral to enter through the holy door and pray to the Virgin Mary. In Central Africa, before the war, Christians and Muslims used to live together and must learn to do so again. Lebanon also shows that this is possible".

Islam is growing and spreading, but we mostly hear about Islamism which is so destructive not only to people of other faiths but to many fellow Muslims. American Daniel Pipes suggests Islamism "demands complete adherence to the sacred law of Islam. It has a deep antagonism towards non-Muslims and a particular hostility towards the West. Islamism attempts to turn the religion and civilization of Islam into an ideology. It openly relies on state power for coercive purposes." Jihadism uses force to spread Islamism.

It is easy to forget that within Christianity (and Catholicism) there is radical fundamentalism and hatred. Many members of the KKK in the 1920's were Protestant Christians. We need to develop and maintain healthy and realistic relationships with Islam. In such a secularist age, both Christianity and Islam are easily condemned as inadequate by looking just at the serious failures (such as clerical sexual abuse and cover ups, corruption, legalism, intolerance etc) rather than their inherent goodness.

A senior Vatican communications advisor, Fr Thomas Rosica CSB says some Catholic conversation on-line is more "culture of death" than "culture of life."

“Many of my non-Christian and non-believing friends have remarked to me that we ‘Catholics’ have turned the internet into a cesspool of hatred, venom and vitriol, all in the name of defending the faith! The character assassination on the internet by those claiming to be Catholic and Christian has turned it into a graveyard of corpses strewn all around. Often times the obsessed, scrupulous, self-appointed, nostalgia-hankering virtual guardians of faith or of liturgical practices are very disturbed, broken and angry individuals, who never found a platform or pulpit in real life and so resort to the internet and become trolling pontiffs and holy executioners,” Fr Rosica said. “In reality they are deeply troubled, sad and angry people,” he said.

On his flight back from Africa on November 30th, 2015, Pope Francis was asked about fundamentalism and Islam. He said, *“Fundamentalism is a disease that exists in all religions. In the Catholic church we have some -- many -- who believe they possess the absolute truth and they go on sullyng others through slander and defamation and this is wrong. Religious fundamentalism must be combated. It is not religious, God is lacking, it is idolatrous. Dialogue is possible, they have many values and these values are constructive... You cannot wipe out a religion just because there are some or a number of groups of fundamentalists at one moment in history. It is true, there have always been wars between faiths and we too need to ask for forgiveness”*

Professor Terry Lovat has spent more than twenty years researching and studying Islam. He notes that *“Islam was founded on a reform movement and was a thousand years ahead of the West in addressing issues normally associated with the Western Enlightenment. Its earliest civilizations were characterized by remarkable levels of intercultural and interfaith tolerance, as well as universal forms of education, healthcare and welfare. Of greatest import were its principles of equity and fairness, many of them safeguarded by its unique law, known as Sharia. Islam developed one of the world’s first structures for ensuring the protection of minority groups and some of the world’s first laws for ensuring the rights of women”*.

Lovat quotes Tunisian, Mohamed Talbi who says that *“failure to deal with difference and its legitimacy simply perpetuates the tensions that have torn so many generations apart around the divisions between Jewish, Christian and Islamic belief. Talbi suggests that God’s plan was always intended to be unfolded in many stages, with, at its centre, Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a troika of beliefs, complementary to each other rather than competitive. Only through profound acceptance of this truth can age-old misunderstanding and violence, including the forces that threaten our civilization today, be turned around”*.

Such insights are important for Christians to hear, because our knowledge of true Islam is minimal. Given the tensions in our world it would seem wise for us to become better informed. Addressing the Italian bishops on 11th November 2015, Pope Francis urged the church to stop clinging to conservatism and fundamentalism as a defensive response to the problems the church is facing.

“Christian doctrine is not a closed system incapable of generating questions, doubts, interrogatives. But it is alive, knows being unsettled ... it does not have a rigid face, it has a body that moves and grows, it has a soft flesh: it is called Jesus Christ.”

There are other challenges too. Having seen the rise of fundamentalism in Argentina and throughout Latin America, Pope Francis is aware that the poor are easy victims of those preachers who promise prosperity. Francis has noted that, *“the Catholic faith of many peoples is nowadays being challenged by the proliferation of new religious movements, some of which tend to fundamentalism while others seem to propose a spirituality without God. This is, on the one hand, a human reaction to a materialistic, consumerist and individualistic society, but it is also a means of exploiting the weaknesses of people living in poverty and on the fringes of society, people who make ends meet amid great human suffering and are looking for immediate solutions to their needs. These religious movements, not without a certain shrewdness, come to fill, within a predominantly individualistic culture, a vacuum left by secularist rationalism.*

We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization”.

In 2014, Pope Francis and Grand Mufti Rahmi Yaran were able to meet and pray in the prayed in Istanbul’s historic Blue Mosque. After years of tense relations Pope Francis, since his election, has emphasized mutual values and shared beliefs, kissed a Quran, washed the feet of two Muslim Serbian female inmates at a prison in Rome and pushed for dialogue with Muslim communities. His efforts have mended a deep wedge between the two communities. Muslim leaders say the pope has come to embody religious values to which their communities also adhere. Instead of championing a Crusade, Francis is promoting understanding and dialogue. Providing such leadership invites us to reflect on what we can and must do to create positive relationships with Muslims. One place to begin is to become better informed than many of us are.

The Shifting population

On the world stage, new powers (e.g. China, India and Brazil) are emerging. China and India between them have 2.5 billion people (37% of the world’s population). Brazil is the fifth most populous country in the world with 210 million, 62% of whom are under thirty years of age. It has the highest Catholic population of any country.

The United States and Indonesia have the third and fourth highest populations with Pakistan (sixth) and Nigeria (seventh) and Bangladesh (eighth) following. Nigeria is expected to overtake the US by 2050. 60% of the world's population today lives in Asia and 15% live in Africa, but this African percentage will grow to 50% by 2050. Latin America's population will grow from 600 million today, to 775 million by 2050, 50 million more people than Europe. Europe has 16% of people aged below 15 years, Asia has 25% and Africa has 41%. In Europe those aged 65 and older is projected to rise to 27% by 2050. By that same year (2050) Australia will have a population of 36 million and New Zealand 5.5 million. Added to these statistics is the effect of transmigration policies in various countries where whole communities are relocated as well as the continuing transfer of people from rural communities to large overcrowded cities. As well as this movement there is the effect that refugees and asylum seekers are having.

Turkey has taken in almost two million Syrians. Lebanon with a much smaller population (of 4.5 million) has taken in 1.1 million Syrians. Jordan with a population of 8 million already comprised of almost 50% Palestinians, has taken in one million mostly Syrian refugees. Northern Iraq has taken in 250,000 Syrian refugees. Many desperate refugees are seeking a new life – wherever they can find it. Some are forced to move because of war, others by hunger or because of the harsh climatic conditions that prevent them from growing crops or making a living. The population make-up of many countries such as Sweden has been changing quickly and profoundly, however in January 2016 the government announced it intended to send back 800,000 refugees who they claimed were not genuine asylum seekers. The percentage of Asians in New Zealand has doubled to 11.8% since 2001 and this affects the general society and the church, since many of these people are church attenders. We can expect continued migration, both planned and forced to change the population mix in the coming years.

Secularism

There has been a rise in secularism in recent years in a growing attempt to build a society that is free of religious influence and involves two basic propositions; the separation of the state from religious institutions and declaring that people of different religions and beliefs are equal before the law along with non-believers. Secularism thrives on pluralism without necessarily identifying common principles or prioritizing them. It is not of itself hostile towards religion but is strongly supported by atheists. Secularists oppose special treatment for those with religious beliefs and organisations so they propose that there is no religious education in schools, unless it is multi-faith and secular history. Some secularists oppose public prayers especially before special events.

In cultures where the Church has lost power and influence, the vacuum has been inherited by secularism and sometimes, as in the case of Ireland, this has happened rapidly. Secularism supports the rights of minority groups and champions human rights above religious demands that might discriminate or

restrict options. Issues such as euthanasia, abortion and gay marriage are less about moral values and more about claiming personal rights, while sometimes not reflecting an underlying philosophy other than personal freedom. Since the French revolution there have been ongoing attempts to fight for the rights of various groups in many countries (slaves, workers, women, children, indigenous peoples, gays) and causes (equal pay and equal opportunities, the right to work, racism, discrimination, the environment etc. In most cases these have been driven by secularists rather than by religious groups.

It is not surprising that fundamentalism is one reaction to secularism. This is usually a concerted attempt to fight back against the loss of traditional values. Apathy, on the other hand may well be another reaction as people increasingly come to believe that pluralism and freedom are the ultimate values.

In the April 2016 interview, *Pope Francis said states must be secular but “people must be free to profess their faith at the heart of their own culture, not merely at its margins. We are all equal as sons (and daughters) of God and with our personal dignity. However, everyone must have the freedom to externalize his or her own faith. If a Muslim woman wishes to wear a veil, she must be able to do so. Similarly, if a Catholic wishes to wear a cross”*. He added that *“once a law has been adopted, the state must also respect [people's] consciences. The right to conscientious objection must be recognized within each legal structure because it is a human right”*.

Consumerism and the poor

Pope Francis is a Latin American. His was Archbishop of Buenos Aires in Argentina for 15 years and had first hand experience not only of poverty, but of the devastation to the middle-class and the poor that resulted from the Argentine depression of 198-2002. Jorge Bergoglio was often called ‘the bishop of the slums’. He has spoken frequently about the global economy, consumerism and the poor and it is clear he speaks from first hand experience.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), he identified a number of economic concerns. *“The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us. One cause of this situation is found in our relationship with money, since we calmly accept its dominion over ourselves and our societies. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption”*.

“While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless.

As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape. Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a “throw away” culture which is now spreading. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”.

“Debt and the accumulation of interest make it difficult for countries to realize the potential of their own economies and keep citizens from enjoying their real purchasing power. To all this we can add widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion, which have taken on worldwide dimensions. The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule”.

“Until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence. The poor and the poorer peoples are accused of violence, yet without equal opportunities the different forms of aggression and conflict will find a fertile terrain for growth and eventually explode. When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programmes or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility.

Today’s economic mechanisms promote inordinate consumption, yet it is evident that unbridled consumerism combined with inequality proves doubly damaging to the social fabric. Inequality eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve. All this becomes even more exasperating for the marginalized in the light of the widespread and deeply rooted corruption found in many countries – in their governments, businesses and institutions – whatever the political ideology of their leaders”.

In October 2015, Swiss bank Credit Suisse reported that global wealth inequality continues to worsen and has reached a new milestone, with the top 1% owning more of the world's assets than the bottom 99% combined! Patrick Martin writing for the World Socialist Web Site, states “These disparities between countries, like the growing social disparities within countries, have immense significance for world politics. They are a major factor in the increasingly explosive character of international relations, particularly the conflicts between the major imperialist powers—the United States, Japan, Germany, France, Britain—and countries like Russia, China and Iran that are being targeted for their huge natural and human resources.

The US has less than 5% of the world’s population, but an incredible 46% of the world’s millionaires, making it both the wealthiest and by far the most unequal country in the world. The rich have never increased their wealth so quickly as in America since the financial crash of 2008.

But while some have amassed massive private fortunes, the infrastructure of America is crumbling, education, health care and other social services are starved of funding, and the living standards of the vast majority of the population, the working people who produce the wealth, are declining.

The irony of modern day prosperity in Western type countries countries such as New Zealand and Australia, is that this prosperity seems not to bring true happiness. Despite having so much compared with the world's poor, many people, especially the young look for more and more 'highs'. We are accustomed to hearing slogans like 'retail therapy' and 'shop til you drop' and we witness everywhere the constant accumulation of possessions, often in response to the ever increasing pace of obsolescence. In 2008 British psychologist Oliver James claimed that affluenza (placing a high value on money, possessions, fame and physical and social appearance has led to increasing mental illness in English-speaking societies.

He suggested that there is a correlation between increasing affluenza and the resulting increase in material inequality: the more unequal a society, the greater the unhappiness of its citizens.

There is no question that hundreds of millions of people throughout the world enjoy a comfortable standard of living that was denied them just twenty years ago, however at the same time, millions have been plunged into even greater poverty than before, and the effects of climate change combined with war has left a hundred million people homeless. Economic greed threatens the planet. Consumerism is not sustainable. The political, social and environmental consequences of a market driven economy are devastating. There are two critical questions raised by this:

- i) what happens to the 'have not's'?
- ii) what does all of this cost the earth?

More than one billion people do not have clean safe drinking water. The importance of water to political and social stability will increase and water resource issues in lesser developed countries present many challenges including: inadequate drinking-water, supply and sanitation facilities, water pollution caused by animal and human waste, floods, siltation of river systems, and the management of rivers and large dams. Barriers to addressing water problems in developing nations include poverty, illiteracy, rapid population growth and ineffective policies and practices for conserving and distributing water resources.

Care of our common home - the Earth

Passionist Thomas Berry constantly reminded people that the universe is “*a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects*”.

Like many prophets, Berry was not universally recognised, especially in church circles, but much of his thinking is reflected in Pope Francis first encyclical "Laudato Si".

In Western culture it has been the mystics and poets from classical traditions who have intuited deep connections with all being which Berry and now Pope Francis urge us to recognise. Cosmologist Brian Swimme, a partner in Tom Berry's writings, urges us to see that we are the Universe in the form of a human and this is true of everyone. This understanding of ourselves is profoundly inclusive and helps us discover a profound kinship. Swimme says, "*No matter what being we are talking about on the planet, we are related in terms of energy, we are related in terms of genetics, we are all in one way or another a form of kin –it's overwhelming. It's just now coming into human awareness it is going to take a lot of reflection to embody*". We must begin that journey.

Pope Francis notes, "*Everything is connected. Time and space, physical, chemical and biological components of the planet, form a network that we will never fully understand.*" He began his encyclical expressing a desire to *enter into dialogue with every living person on this planet about 'our common home'*. He recognises that there is a need to act urgently on behalf of Earth, on behalf of future generations, and especially on behalf of justice for poor and marginalized people who are most impacted by the destructive power of climate change and environmental destruction.

Francis called for a conversion that is not only personal, but it is a renewal of our families and our communities, so that could include our Passionist Family Group. He highlighted that individualism and rampant consumerism have led to decisions based on short-term gains and private interests rather than sustainability or the common good. He challenges us to be attuned to "*the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us and to let our actions reflect a sincere care and respect for all of God's creation*".

Francis took up some principal concepts:

- the interwoven relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet
- the conviction that everything in the world is connected
- the critique of new forms of power derived from technology
- the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress
- the value proper to each creature
- the human meaning of ecology
- the need for open and honest debate
- the serious responsibility of international and local policy
- the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle

He asked, "*What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?*"

This question does not have to do with the environment alone and in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal. This leads us to ask ourselves about the meaning of existence and its values at the base of social life: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?”

There are climate change skeptics. Cardinal George Pell is one of them, who pointed out that Pope Francis is not a scientist. Neither, it might be said is he!

The encyclical highlights, “Climate change is a global problem with serious implications, environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. Climate changes afflict entire populations and are among the causes of migration movements, but “many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms.

Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded. To preserve the climate “represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day”

Something new is needed and Pope Francis is calling for a new world focus that is opposed to the aggressive greed of unbridled capitalism and is focused on the needs of the poor and suffering, including the Earth. His vision is that this world would be characterized by mercy and tenderness.

As we gather in 2016, our focus is not first on ‘saving our souls’. We are challenged by the realities of the world in which we find ourselves. Change is so rapid, we hardly dare imagine what technology will be doing in a decade, and what it will do to our planet and to us, if we continue to acquiesce to a mentality of continual obsolescence, seeking ever new and more fancy products while ignoring the suffering of the poor that results.

Our Christian consciences are facing new questions. We need to talk together so as to find some answers or direction, and so as to show the way forward for our children and grandchildren.

I have looked at six issues that are current in our world today.

- Terrorism
- Islamism
- The Shifting Populations
- Refugees
- Consumerism and the Poor
- Care of our Common Home (Climate Change)

It would have been possible to also include technology because apart from how technology is changing our social lives and ways of communicating, there are significant moral issues involved in contemporary developments such as artificial intelligence, transhuman development, the use of genetics, privacy and securing data, not to mention continuing obsolescence. However, these are largely social challenges, whereas the ones we are considering affect our response as Christians and perhaps as PFG members.

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