



Pastoral Letter

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The Celebration of a Marian Year in our Diocese

I have come to the end of my pastoral visit to our missionaries in Perù. It has been a lovely time imbuing me with joy and hope. There I was exposed to the stench of societal wretchedness but at the same time I encountered a Church brimming over with life, youthfulness and enthusiasm. The parishes there are nowhere near as rich as ours, in so far as they sorely lack not only material goods but also priests and religious. On the other hand they are endowed with spiritual wealth. People have a simple but authentic faith. They have interesting catechetical programmes for young and old. A good number of the laity exercise different ministries. Their liturgy has nothing theatrical about it: instead the whole community participates with joy and passion. Above all, I beheld a Church which loves the poor, a Church which makes a difference to the life of many, especially of those who have lost all hope.

There I could experience a Church which has received, and still receives, much from the Church in Gozo. It was a source of great consolation for me to see that there was much to confirm that I am the shepherd of a missionary Church: the Church in Gozo is very fond of the missions! It is enough to mention Fr Raymond Portelli from the Parish of Nadur, Fr Giovanni Cefai and Fr Victor Zammit, both from the Parish of Żebbuġ, and Fr Marcel Portelli from the Parish of Fontana, these last three all members of the Missionary Society of St Paul. We are truly honoured through these priests, and they assure me that their mission rests on the spiritual and material support of so many Gozitans and Maltese – something to be greatly appreciated.

At the same time there is a lot the Church in Perù has to offer us. I am convinced the Church in the missions can help us get out of the furrows in which we get stuck through the passage of time, so that we can discover anew a fresh faith in Jesus Christ and the awesome power of his Gospel. This Church in Perù is relatively young: Fr Raymond's parish is only 50 years old and the Missionary Society of St Paul is celebrating the fiftieth year of its presence in Arequipa. This Church is truly free of some of the many burdens we have inherited and with which we are encumbered when we try to get to the heart of our faith and make the necessary pastoral choices. The Church in the missions can help us put our pastoral priorities in order; it can stimulate us to be a church which gives more space to the laity, thereby shedding some of its clericalism; it can help us purify our popular religiosity; it can inspire us to commit ourselves more seriously to adult catechisis; it can be an example to us, showing us how to be nearer to those on the fringes of society; ... and the list goes on.

In other words, the Church in the missions helps us put Jesus Christ at the heart of everything. I could see that in many pastoral centres there are chapels for the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and people really seek out Jesus in the Eucharist. I was one day taken to visit an old lady living in a hovel: she is utterly desitute but she has a strong faith in Jesus Christ. I was mesmerised by her when, when through her tears she told me that Jesus is her hope. How true it is that we have so much to learn from the poor! And how much should we let them evangelise us! (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 198).

I could also see that Peruvians have a great love for Mary, the Mother of Jesus. I am convinced that Mary has an important role to play in building the Church. Because “Mary is intimately tied up to the Church ... she is an image of the Church in the order of faith, of charity and of perfect unity with Christ” (*Lumen gentium*, 63). Truly as our Holy Father Francis proclaims, “together with the Holy Spirit, Mary is always at the heart of the People of God” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 284).

Next year, please God, marks the 400th anniversary of the painting of the miraculous image of Our Lady of Ta’ Pinu by Amadeo Perugino. Everybody knows how fond our people are of this image: we kneel before it when we pray for Our Lady’s intercession and protection, especially when we are in need of special graces.

On this occasion we are going to celebrate in our diocese a Marian Year, starting today with the manifestation for Crist the King in the Sanctuary of Ta’ Pinu and ending with the Vigil for the feast of Santa Marija which is held every year on the parvis of the same Sanctuary.

It is my conviction that as a Church, we, in this island, should respond with renewed enthusiasm to our Mother’s call: “Come! Come! Come!” I feel that today too, from her image, Mary is telling us: “Come my son to praise the greatness of the Lord, present and alive in the story of your life and in that of your fellowmen! Come in order to obtain healing from the weight of sin and infidelity, come in order to find the soothing consolation of mercy! Come in order to experience in your heart the powerful arm of the Saviour who has done mighty deeds for us! Come in order to be filled with the Holy Spirit who bids you hasten to the hills of today’s society where man is so thirsty for the joy of Christ! Come, Christian community, discard what belongs to the past and has now lost its savour, and behold my son Jesus in order to discover new ways for evangelisation!”.

My brethren, let us throughout this year behold our dear Mother, “because every time we look at Mary we rediscover our belief in the revolutionary power of gentleness and love” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 288). It is my wish that throughout this year we come to know our Mother a bit better so that through her we become more familiar with Jesus Christ, acquiring a renewed recognition of the reality of the Church and taking some steps forward in this process of renewal of the Church, along the lines I proposed earlier. This would bode well for the continued establishment of the kingdom of Christ the King among us.

The pastoral challenge we are faced with requires the special grace of God. I am therefore inviting the people of God to pray to Our Lady of Ta’ Pinu with the beautiful prayer of the Rosary throughout this Marian year: may Our Lady obtain for us the grace of seeking new ways how to bring to everyone the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Lady of Ta’ Pinu. “obtain for us a renewed zeal based on the Resurrection so that we can bring to everybody the Gospel of life which overcomes death. Give us the courage to seek out new ways to bring to everyone the gift of lasting joy.” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 288) Amen.

Given from Lima, Perù, on Wednesday, 21 November 2018, on the liturgical feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

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