

**Retreat for Carers in Mental Health
Douai Abbey 30th – 2nd June 2014**

Talk I – Introduction

Introductory Remarks

Welcome to this year's Retreat for those interested in Mental Health Pastoral Care – and welcome to Douai Abbey. This is the third of these retreats and it is good for us to be here together for these few days. We have the advantage of placing ourselves in this monastic setting, for the pattern of prayer that is at the centre of this community's life will support us over these next couple of days.

It is also a pattern of prayer in which we can immerse ourselves and I do encourage you to join in the round of prayer, even if this may mean some early rising for some of us.

We all live busy lives, I am sure, and it is good for us to step aside from the daily round and the breath the air of prayer and reflection. We can take time, together and alone, to place ourselves afresh before the Lord and to remind ourselves that we live our lives in the palm of his hand.

Silence can be a struggle, especially when we are not accustomed to it. I am privileged to live alone and to have a chapel with the Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in my house. It is possible to be silent. This is luxury that is not so readily available to many today, in a world where so many surround themselves with noise and busy-ness. So, allow yourselves to enter the silence. You may find it a challenge, but we are invited to enter that silent house where God abides.

Time spent together in prayer and, tomorrow morning and on Wednesday morning, in shared *Lectio Divina*, will – if we open our minds and hearts to the promptings of the Holy Spirit – be fruitful. We shall have opportunities to share, to ask questions and to chat together. But I do invite you to situate all of this in the Silence that is the abode of God Himself.

Evangelii Gaudium

The theme for this retreat is *The Joy of the Gospel* – the title of the Encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis. This has rapidly become a famous document – perhaps even a fashionable one – and some of its phrases are oft-quoted by the media. I have chosen it for two reasons: firstly, that that the document is “current” and so bears our consideration; secondly that Gospel Joy is at the heart of Health in every sense, perhaps most especially Mental Health. The search – and, God-willing, the discovery – of the Joy that is found in the Gospel is THE answer to the challenges faced by so many.

The road is not an easy one and we will all know those for whom an inauthentic religious experience contributes to difficulties in mental health. So, discernment is needed too – to enable people to distinguish that which is true and that which is false. When Truth is found, then we find the Way to Life – and Jesus speaks of Himself as all three: “I am the Way, the Truth and Life. No one can come to Father except through me.”¹ So, we are on a journey to the Life in which we find our Joy, a life that is “Life to Full.”²

¹ Jn.14:6

² Jn.10:10

Let us, then, take a look at this Encyclical Letter from Pope Francis, which begins with the words:

“The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.”³

The Holy Father’s concern here is with the encounter with Christ. It is an invitation we are called to accept. When we do, it is liberating. For those struggling with mental health difficulties of all kinds, sorrow, inner emptiness, loneliness and – very often – real difficulties with their understanding of sin – are all too real. So, this document has, at first glance, something to say to us.

In order to hear the offer of salvation to which Pope Francis refers at the outset of his Encyclical we must have open ears. Saint Benedict speaks about this at the beginning of his Rule and those who have joined in these retreats will have heard me say this before. The Rule begins with the following words:

“Listen carefully, my Son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.”⁴

There are two things that we should think about here. The first is our own disposition. Is the ear of my heart inclined towards the Lord who invites me? Secondly, for those in our care, how can we facilitate their listening to the One who is Life? How can we enable them to hear the message of Gospel Joy that will transform their lives and lead them out of loneliness, emptiness and sorrow, to that Life that is whole, a Life that is lived in the love that exists in the Trinity?

For us to be the bearers of the Good News to those who live with challenges in Mental Health, a real understanding of what “Joy” really is will be vital.

So, I invite you during this first period of reflection to find a quiet place and ask yourself what the word “Joy” really means. What is your experience of “Joy” – at its many different levels. What does “Gospel Joy” mean? To find the answers it will require us to listen to the voice of the Spirit dwelling within us, so a period of quiet and reflection will assist us. When we gather again after tea, we can, perhaps, bring our thoughts together a little and then explore our Theme a little more deeply.

³ POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in today’s World, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014, n.1. (Hereafter EG).

⁴ “Obsculta, O fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui.” FRY.T, et al, RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1981. Prologue, 1. (Hereafter RB).