

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

Talk 6 – Prayer and Community

On each of these retreats over the last three years, the subject of one of the talks has always been prayer and the question I would like to pose this morning is: ‘Out of what space do I live my life?’

I believe this is important for everyone, but for those engaged in the care of others, especially in challenging circumstances, this question takes on a particular gravity. If I am engaged in the care of the dementia patient, where do I go to find strength and purpose in the call that God has given me? What do I bring to the one in my care?

We know from the Gospels that whenever Jesus was engaged in his healing and preaching ministry, he “went off to a lonely place”¹ to pray, to spend time with the Father. This is all the more important for us, perhaps, who are so weak and faltering in our relationship with God. Yet, it is in this place of prayer that God speaks to our hearts in a very particular way. The intimacy of the experience of personal prayer, together with the celebration of Mass and the Sacrament of Penance – provide the encounter with the love of God that enables us to fulfil all that he requires of us. It is out of this space that we must live.

Pope Francis is very clear, too, that this experience is not for ourselves alone. At a recent Audience, he spoke of the personal encounter with Christ – and the imperative of the communal experience of Faith. We are called into community and there is an imperative for the Christian to share all that we have received.

“If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence.”²

In terms of the ministry of care to which you have been called, it is our relationship with Christ that is both the motivation and the purpose of our lives. It is Christ who calls us to this work and it is Christ that we share. This does require of us a certain measure of the contemplative and one of the best approaches we can take is that of *Lectio Divina* – the gentle, reflective reading of the Word, allowing that Word – the same Word that was made flesh in the person of Jesus – to take root in us, to mould us and form our lives. Pope Francis makes reference to this also:

“The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realise ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others.”³

It is the ‘Space of the Gospel’, therefore, out of which we must strive to live our lives and Pope Francis provides a diagnosis for those times when we lose our way:

¹ Mt.

² EG, n.264.

³ loc.cit.

“Sometimes we lose our enthusiasm for mission because we forget that the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters.”⁴

Pope Francis situates our lives of prayer in such a way as we are called to look two ways: to Him and to those whom we serve. Prayer is not authentic unless it has this two-fold direction, for we are not called alone, but as community.

The Holy Father goes on to say:

“Jesus’ whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity and finally his complete self-giving, is precious and reveals the mystery of his divine life. Whenever we encounter this anew, we become convinced that it is exactly what others need, even though they may not recognise it...if we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people’s hearts.”⁵

This, then, is our vocation as Christians, especially in our context as people called to serve those for whom the relationship with the Lord has been complicated through ill health, made difficult through dementia. Those words “even though they may not recognise it” are vital for us, for we must continue to proclaim the Gospel – even in quiet and hidden ways – confident that the reception of the love of God will take place at a level that cannot be expressed.

In order for us to persevere in this response to God’s call to us, we must continually return to the One who is the source and ground of all love. We must strive to know him ever more deeply, thereby assuring that all we do emanates from that place where God abides, deep within us, for “he is with you, he is in you.”⁶

“Unless we see him present at the heart of our ... commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigour and passion. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody.”⁷

These words of the Holy Father are unequivocal, reminding us that our sole motivation for action must be the person of Christ.

Our service of others – the reason why we have gathered here at Douai – is, in Pope Francis’ terms, the *locus* of our commitment to evangelisation. Our prayer, as we have seen above, takes us to others, thus:

“we need to develop a spiritual taste for being close to people’s lives and to discover that this is itself a source of greater joy. Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people.”⁸

⁴ EG, n.265.

⁵ loc.cit.

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⁷ EG, n.266.

⁸ EG, n.268.

“Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others.”⁹

This resonates with “the smell of the sheep” and it is this ‘going out’ that is the necessary consequence of our time spent sitting at the feet of the Master. There is also a ‘going in’ to which the Holy Father refers. He writes:

“Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God. Benedict XVI has said that ‘closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God’...When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts.”¹⁰

We have seen the dialogue that exists between ourselves and those for whom the Lord calls us to care. This relationship also speaks to us, then, of the two-fold relationship of prayer: that relationship with God that enables us to serve others from that space and also enables us to see Christ in them, recognise their giftedness and the love that dwells in them, taking us back to glorify God for the wonder of his love.

May the Lord Bless each and every one of us, as we seek to dwell in Him and, from that dwelling place, share with other the love that he has first shown us, that all may know the wonder of the Joy of the Gospel.

⁹ EG, n.271.

¹⁰ EG, n.272.