

LAUNCH OUT LETTERS (LOL)

Newsletter and Journal of Te Hao Nui– Launch Out Formation Programme
Archdiocese of Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand

Archdiocese of Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand

Welcome to the March issue of LOL.

Recently we farewelled Cardinal Tom Williams and Monsignor Charles Cooper who both joined our Creator, at the threshold of the old and the new years. This serendipitously reflects another threshold they both have crossed at the time of their ordinations. In the homily given by Fr. Michael McCabe during the requiem of Charles Cooper he shared that the ordination of Tom and Charles happened just around the time of Vatican II. In other words, they began their ministry at the cusp when most of what they had learned from their seminary formation had just been changed. Instead of resisting the reforms of Vatican II they dedicated their lives to reflecting and engendering what that means in pastoral ministry, in their relationship with the laity and their understanding of baptismal priesthood and the way they carried out their ordained priesthood. These two amazing priests were significant figures in the history of Te Hao Nui- Launch Out. The Synods of 1988 and 1998 called by Cardinal Tom were the genesis of Lay Pastoral Leadership, which consequently created Launch Out. Charles Cooper was the first parish priest who worked collaboratively with a Lay Pastoral Leader. During their lifetimes they continued to support Launch Out in diverse ways. Their passing is a great loss and their presence will be missed. We owe both men a depth of gratitude for the ground we stand on.

Mary Ann Greaney, Launch Out Graduate and faithful supporter, wrote a fitting tribute to Cardinal Tom for his pioneering efforts in making the Archdiocese of Wellington a model of collaborative ministry for other dioceses around the world. We are fortunate that **Charles Cooper** contributed an article back in 2020, which we have re-published on this issue of LOL. In the same vein, on 13 March, we celebrate the 11th anniversary the pontificate of Pope Francis. Pope Francis with his reforms, treads the same path of Vatican II as Cardinal Tom and Charles. **Bridget Taumoepeau** writes a synthesis of his significant works since his election. She closes with an endearing letter to Francis; she may have well written it on our behalf.

Margaret Bearsley writes a reflection on the Gospel for the 4th Sunday of Lent (Sunday Mass for 10 March) about Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus. In this Gospel Jesus explains the nature of his divinity, which is at its core, love. Margaret highlights the love of Jesus, which is the light that overpowers the darkness; such light is within our reach, and in fact, nearer than we could ever imagine. It is a fitting Gospel in celebration of the lives and ministries of Tom, Charles and Francis.

As the journey of discipleship is never an easy one, Tom, Charles and Francis, like all of us, have crossed many deserts in their lives. Lent is often associated with entering a desert, marked by desolation, sacrifice and gripping Catholic guilt and shame. However, in truth, the desert is a place where our intimacy with God grows and is perfected. Pope Francis' Lenten message poignantly puts it *"Lent is the season of grace in which the desert becomes once more...the place of our first love."* May our Lenten journey be one of a growing awareness of God's love, and may it transform us and make us fitting vessels of God's plan.

Maya Bernardo, Launch Out Formator and Manager

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*When he had finished eating, he said to Simon,
"Launch out into the deep water and let down your
nets for a catch".*

Luke 5: 4

Have courage; turn back to the light !

By Margaret Bearsley
Launch Out Candidate

4th Sunday of Lent (John 3: 14-21)

Remember Cher's song from the 80s?: *If I could turn back time; if I could find a way. I'd take back those words that hurt you, and you'd stay!* For the scientifically minded, the song might seem ridiculous. It is not possible for time to go backwards. For the broken hearted, the song reveals the wounds of love.

The readings for this 4th Sunday of Lent focus on that great theme of the Bible: God is love.

Love. Oh yeah, that thing that hurts us and breaks our heart! But it is a mistake to project onto God our human way of being. We fall in and out of love, we run hot and cold, and we are fickle and unreliable in love.

God is not like this. God's very nature is love. And because God is eternal, we are told, God never changes. God is *Hesed*, Tender Mercy. Nothing but love itself.



The Old Testament (for this Sunday, the first reading is from 2 Chronicles 36), provides a sweeping history of God's dealings with God's own people, Israel. It is a history of failings, of God's holy place, the Temple, being polluted with corrupt practices. The history recounts God's sending, through compassion, messengers, the prophets, to bring the errant people back to him. But the love is offered, and it is refused.

God's anger, which is often referred to in the Old Testament, is not some passing emotion. Rather it is the anger of love for the beloved ones who cause damage, who inflict wounds on themselves and on their brothers and sisters. The Lord's passion is enflamed, a passion to set things right. So, God shakes the people out of their backwardness. God destroys the Temple, and the people are carried off to exile in Babylon. For 70 years!

Sometimes only radical actions can bring about change in hard hearts. A tearing down and starting over again. We know that that is how Israel read its own history, because that is how the Old Testament records it. Israel, God's beloved people, recognised that the destruction of the Temple and the political calamities experienced across its history was a purification, a cleansing, and an expression of divine love from the God who was drawing the people back to the heart of its God.

In the Gospel, the scholarly teacher of Israel, Nicodemus, was so curious about Jesus, he snuck out at nighttime to meet him. Why in the dark of night? What was he afraid of? Damage to his reputation? He converses with this strange and dangerous man, Jesus, and he doesn't understand him.

Amongst the strange, yet somehow familiar, things Jesus tells Nicodemus, is that God's *Hesed* has taken another impassioned step in Israel's messy history: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life ... those who live the truth come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Nicodemus was not brave enough, until the crucifixion, to come out in full daylight. In the midst of the chaos and pain of that day, he did do public honour to Jesus by giving him a burial fit for a King (Jn 19:38-42).

What about the calamities in our own lives? Do we see them as dumb, unfair suffering? We love the dark when we cling to our hurt and shake our fist at God for the injustice of our suffering—when we beg the universe to turn back time.

But when we find purification in our pain, seek to do loving actions in response to it, to mature and let go of our neediness, we look to the light. This is impossible by our own efforts. As St Paul says to the Ephesians in the second reading: it is by grace that we are saved, raised up, drawn to the light, made able to do acts of love.

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But when we find purification in our pain, seek to do loving actions in response to it, to mature and let go of our neediness, we look to the light. This is impossible by our own efforts. As St Paul says to the Ephesians in the second reading: it is by grace that we are saved, raised up, drawn to the light, enabled to do acts of love.

In God's passion to set the broken world to rights, God broke open his own heart in love. God didn't send a representative, not an angelic messenger, but God's own self, in the person of the Son; sent him to gather the broken creation into the bliss of the divine life.

God's centre—the love between the Father and the Son—is what is offered to us to be our centre. That's the light! God's heart breaks open so as to include even the mediocre; even the worst of us. All of us. Even me!

For some time now the emphasis in self-help development opportunities, and in the culture, has centred on *our* personal quest, for whatever it is that we worship—success, good looks, power, etc. It's *our* quest, and our achievement.

This is reversed in Christianity. Christians do not believe that God is 'out there,' like a mountain waiting to be climbed by the self-motivated. No. It is as Preface IV to the Eucharistic Prayers puts it: "Lord, our desire to thank you is itself your gift!" And like the hound of heaven in Francis Thompson's poem, God comes relentlessly searching after us. Even when, like the "I" in the poem, our response is to flee:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
... down the arches of the years;
... and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong feet that followed,
followed after.*

The Old Testament tells us not that God was filled with anger, jealousy, and murderous intent. But that Israel saw itself as a Chosen people, a broken and sinful people; loved enough by their mysterious God to be corrected, purified, and renewed through the harsh realities of life. If they didn't believe that extraordinary fact, there would be no record of their failings and renewals.

Both Jesus and Nicodemus knew that the Old Testament, the Law, and the Prophets, were God's gifts to them. They both knew that they were answerable to God for their respective actions. That was the history and culture of their race. Jesus *knew* the Father. And Nicodemus knew that Jesus knew something about God that he, Nicodemus, was dying of curiosity to learn. Jesus invited him into the light, and eventually, at the darkest and bleakest time of all, Nicodemus came out into the glaring light of courageous loving action in pain.

Jesus draws us back to God again and again, sometimes with correction, sometimes with painful purification. Always with burning passionate love.

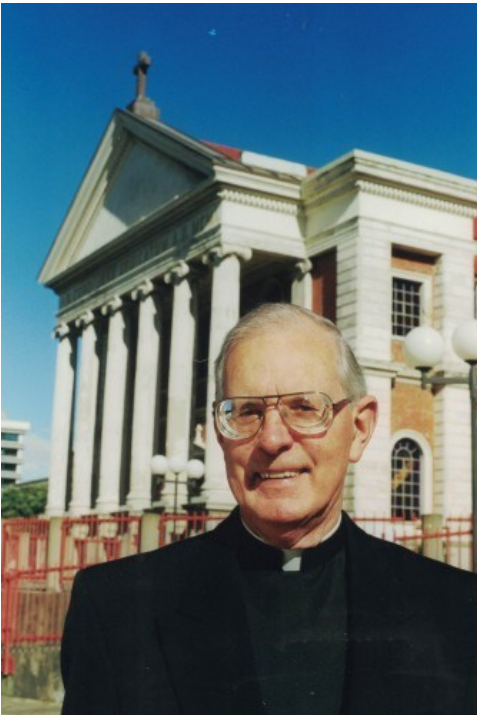
We can know that in the physical world of darkness and light, it is not possible for time to go backwards. But we can be drawn away from looking backwards to the darkness and come into the light by God's grace. We can go out of ourselves and do acts of love—do our deeds in God—and we can do this when we let go of our cherished hurts, accept our 'now' of Jesus' pursuit of us, of God's dialogue with us, and turn outwards to others.

God poured himself out in the giving of himself in the Son, to go all the way down into the deepest mire and miseries of Hell. Those strong feet follow us; they hunt us down, and he offers us the terrible divine love that suffers and dies.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone ... may have eternal life.

The unsung legacy of Cardinal Tomas Williams

By Mary-Ann Greaney
Launch Out Graduate



Cardinal Tom Williams will go down in history as one of the great transformers of the Church in Oceania. Many obituaries have been written and such was his legacy that not all aspects of his contribution can be covered. None the less, I was disappointed to note that only ten words were included about the formation of Launch Out (LO) while he had responsibility for the diocese - one small sentence in WelCom and another in NZ Catholic.

Launch Out (now called Te Hao Nui-Launch Out), a comprehensive leadership formation programme that prepares people for leadership roles in parishes and chaplaincies, has generated excitement over the years. The archdiocese has hosted visitors from overseas wanting to find out more and how they may be able to establish it in their diocese. Some of us have been asked to run workshops and speak in dioceses here and overseas. Some of these conversations have borne fruit especially in Ireland where discussions and parish gatherings I spoke at in 2018 led to a formal invitation to Cardinal John Dew to speak at large events. These were reported in National Catholic Reporter as well as on Irish television and radio. Often, when we speak at gatherings we never hear how our input

was received. In February 2023 I was delighted to read in CathNews that Dublin had put in place a leadership programme that was inspired by Cardinal John's visit. <https://cathnews.co.nz/2023/02/27/lay-catholics-funerals-baptisms-weddings-liturgy-ireland/>

Just this week on Waitangi Day, I received an email from a friend in Ireland, 'Bishop Martin Hayes called to see me on Tuesday. He said that work in his diocese (Cavan) and in several other dioceses in the country has ensued from that meeting in our kitchen with you. Thank God that you came, and Cardinal John later.'

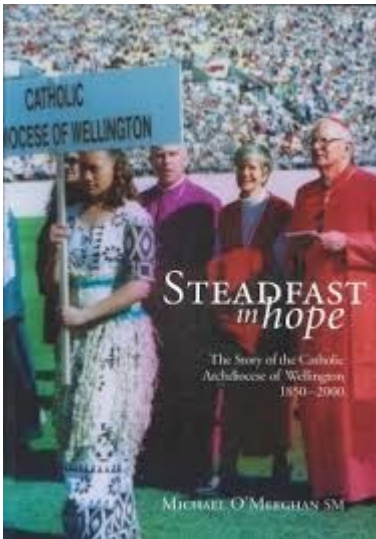
Cardinal Tom was always enthusiastic about Launch Out that came out of the 1988 synod where the idea of lay people ministering in parishes was to be explored. The best people in the diocese were brought together followed by ten years of research, consultation, prayer, and discernment. A task group from the archdiocesan pastoral council and a working group on regional cooperation was established. Part of the terms of reference for this group was an in-depth study of *Christifideles Laici*, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, and *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. This culminated in the decision at the 1998 synod that 'pastoral leadership in those parishes without a resident priest be entrusted to a lay man or woman, and a formation programme be developed' - 228 in favour, 27 against.

Cardinal Tom said at that synod, *'I must state most emphatically that nothing – but nothing! – has been imposed from the top. I trusted in the common sense and sound faith of our people, and neither vetted nor veto-ed. My own vote was but one. These decisions are yours, not mine.'* This attitude was a hallmark of his leadership where consultation and dialogue were as important as leaving room for God to work.



When he had finished eating, he said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch".
Luke 5: 4

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Former Launch Out Formator and Manager Joan McFetridge, Cardinal Tom Williams and Cardinal John Dew. Picture from the book cover "Steadfast in hope. The story of the Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington 1850-2000" by Michael O' Meeghan, SM

In the early days there was no blueprint for this trailblazing model of parish leadership. No name, no formation process or how it may work. Cardinal Tom appointed Joan McFetridge as the formator/manager of this initiative to bring the recommendations to life. It became known as LO. He made clear that the formation process must be an 'integrated programme' and Joan was tasked with discerning what that meant and how to do it. She was ideally suited to the task and hit the ground running. She had been part of the ten-year consultation process and director of the Wellington Catholic Education Centre where the academic programme was well underway, and she had the contacts needed. Cardinal Tom was adamant, 'You wouldn't put an untrained teacher in front of a class of five-year-olds and I will do no less for parishes.' LO was not to take ministries from priests or other lay people, rather to promote leadership in others and help relieve the heavy burden priests are expected to carry.

In 2001 the LO formation programme was established, followed by Cardinal Tom and Archbishop John attending 25 meetings around the diocese in 2003-2005 to share the new model for the local Church.

Cardinal Tom said so many things over the years that it is easy to see how God had prepared him to embrace a new cutting-edge leadership model. As early as 1980 he said,

'I am as committed now, as archbishop, to the concept of lay ministry as before – not because there are now fewer priests engaged in pastoral work! I refuse to accept the diminished number of priests as reason for encouraging lay ministry. Seeing lay ministry as the solution to priest shortage tempts us to set it in the context of expediency. We will end up trying to fill gaps and maintain obsolete models of pastoral care. Seeing lay ministry as an expression of mission arising from baptism and confirmation leads us to give it its proper theological context. We will begin transforming our structures and methods of evangelization, and establish new, more relevant, and effective models for pastoral care' (from "Lay Ministries," a presentation given at a seminar on lay ministries, at the Pastoral Centre, Palmerston North, 20-22 June 1980).

Eight months before Cardinal Tom died I received a letter from him,

*'When I look back on my 25 years as bishop my memories are a mixture of thanksgiving to God for whatever was good, and regret for the things I should have done and neglected to do. LO was a positive. When graduates talk about it here and overseas, those in the audience are hearing the words but seeing before them living testimony to the worth and efficacy of the LO process. One thing I'm sure of: everything that advanced the mission of the archdiocese was the result of the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the esprit de corps that permeated our diocesan personnel: team work, collaboration, respect, and trust in each other's gifts and charisms. **Together** we achieved.'*

The funeral, on 28 December 2023, was a gathering of the institutional memory of the archdiocese – people who had made a significant contribution to the development of Launch Out but could be so easily forgotten in the passage of time. Rest in peace Cardinal Tom, and thank you for your leadership, your trust in the people of God, attention to the Spirit, and preparedness to take a risk. We can all share the good news of Te Hao Nui-Launch Out with others, confident that it may take root in unexpected places.



Mary-Ann Greaney went through Launch Out from 2002 to 2007. She has over 40 years' experience working in the local church of Wellington. She has worked extensively as a Pastoral Area and Justice Peace and Development Advisor, finishing as the Director of Parish Leadership Ministry until leaving in 2021. She is currently the International Animator of 'Friends of Nano', an association of lay people living the charism of Nano Nagle of the Presentation Sisters. She is a recipient of the TCI (now Te Kupenga) Exemplar Award in 2020.

Clericalism from the inside

By Monsignor Charles Cooper

This article by Charles was published in the June 2020 issue of the Launch Out Letters (LOL). Charles was among the first clergy to work with Lay Pastoral Leaders. He was the first priest to work with the first Lay Pastoral Leader, Cushla Quigan in 2006 at San Antonio Eastbourne. Their pioneering partnership was a model for Collaborative Ministry. He later on ministered with Sharon Penny, also at San Antonio then Matthew White (now deacon seminarian) at the Sacred Heart Petone Parish.

In the early days of Launch Out, Charles was a sought after mentor especially when candidates were doing pastoral projects around liturgy. He was also part of deciding the endorsement of candidates during the time of Joan McFetridge. He delivered a seminar-workshop for Launch Out on Collaborative Ministry on January 2020 and has been a font of wisdom and support for the current Formator and Manager, Maya Bernardo.

Charles joined our Creator last 03 January. During his vigil and requiem Mary Ann Greaney (Launch Out Graduate) and Cushla Quigan did the readings, and Matthew White assisted in the liturgies.

In 1960, a few years before the Second Vatican Council, I was ordained priest into a Church still dominated by the Council of Trent. Three years before, I had been made a member of the clergy, having committed to memory the half page of 'privileges' and four pages of obligations – including non-attendance at horse races, taverns, and professional stage shows. Like my fellow ordinands, and priests before me, I had been 'processed' through the system: the seven years of formation.

The following January I moved on from the purdah of the seminary to my first parish appointment as the junior curate in a household of four priests. Generally referred to as 'the young fellah' I was very conscious of having to find my way. After only two or three days there, an elderly Irish priest, visiting the house, took me aside and warned me "Father, you must always keep your distance from the laity, so as not to scandalize them. Few priests are fit to mingle with the laity." I was quite taken aback, already finding the formal style of living in the presbytery a challenge and soon made to realise my friendship with the local Anglican curate and his wife was barely tolerated.



Looking back, we need to realise it was another age in another world. As priests we were responsible, and answerable, for the different activities to which we were appointed in the parish, and we learnt to live with the discomfort of having people instantly standing when we entered a room, having everyone waiting to know "what Father thought" and "what Father wanted" and often enough, Father was expected to know all the answers. Comfortable or not, it was a way of life we got used to and learnt to live.

I think, unfortunately, we did not realise how much these customs and this way of life had become a part of us. After only two years, I was unexpectedly appointed a full-time, regular chaplain to the Royal NZ Air Force. The first time I walked into one of the public rooms of the Officers' Mess, I was taken aback that no one stood up! I soon found it was changing from one form of clericalism for another, and equally, got used to constantly being saluted. And I quickly learnt my place when I went to see my section commander to speak for an airman: "Padre, you may well be right. But of course, I can't accept the advice of a junior officer."

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Before Vatican II, the accepted understanding of the Church, as an organisation, was as a pyramid: the pope, 'with universal authority' at the top; then the various levels of the clergy: bishops, priests, deacons, minor clergy; each responsible to the level above them, then the baptised, 'the faithful', and at the bottom the Catechumen, while still members of the Church. The pre-Vatican II Code of Canon Law (published 1917) reflected that structure and, as such, even supported what we have come to call 'clericalism'. Added to that, then generally accepted sacramental theology understood that, like Baptism, Holy Orders, conferred a 'character' on the soul and thereby brought about an ontological change in their being and distinguished them from the rest of the faithful.

This whole concept of the Church was rejected by the assembled bishops at Vatican II and replaced with the Church being seen as the People of God--distinguished by their baptism as sons and daughters of God in addition to their having been made in God's likeness. They determined that the life of the Church is "Communio", first of all a participation in the life of the Godhead brought about by the Holy Spirit and through which we are members of the Body of Christ. Since there is no greater dignity than the relationship of Jesus with the Father, making us God's daughters and sons through baptism. The different ministries within the Church community are not of power or authority but of service to their community.



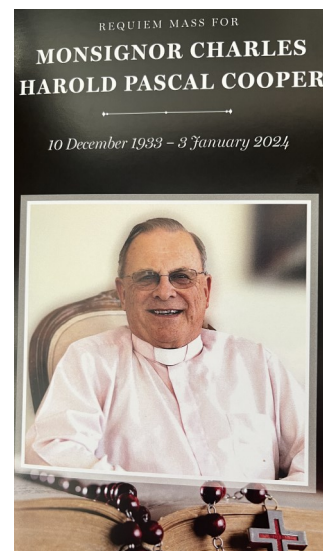
Historically, a parallel to this is to be seen in St Benedict's Rule for the first monastic communities which were lay communities. One of their number was chosen to be ordained to be their priest and, by the Rule, was not allowed to be elected or appointed to any other office. And Vatican II envisaged new and other ministries would develop and come into being as times changed and needs arose.

Church historians tell us that it took just over 100 years for the decisions of the Council of Trent to become established in spite of the urgency for their need. We should expect the same for Vatican II. In the mid-1970s academics were claiming we were then beginning to understand what Vatican II was all about.

There are Catholic universities and institutes of religious formation in different parts of the world still teaching theology much of which is pre-Vatican II. Many priests celebrate Mass with a pre-Vatican understanding of eucharistic theology. In 1986 I was taken aback to hear Pope John Paul II preaching the pre-Vatican II theology of the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick at his celebration of that sacrament in Wellington.

A number of our priests, including some coming to us from overseas, have a pre-Vatican II understanding of their priesthood and are made to feel insecure by talk of collaborative ministry, sensing their understanding of priesthood is being threatened. As a result, they cling to a form of clericalism. When Cardinal John told a gathering of priests that they have to realise the Archdiocese of Wellington is a Synodal Church, I'm sure a number of them didn't understand what he was saying.

So, in spite of Pope Francis' condemnation, clericalism will still be with us for a few years yet. That's bothersome and its perpetrators need to be pitied because they're missing out on the joy the priesthood becomes when it's shared with the collaborative ministry that Launch Out is giving to us all.



ONLINE RESOURCES

- **Food for Faith** <https://foodforfaith.org.nz/>
- **Interfaith resources**
 - ◇ [In US, some Muslim-Jewish interfaith initiatives are strained by Israel-Hamas war - NZ Herald](#)
 - ◇ [Holy Land work to build respect - NZ Catholic Newspaper](#)
- **Culture shock: When African priests are sent to the west.** A recommended reading by Bridget Taumoepeau.
- When Czech theologian **Tomas Halik** visited Wellington last 08 Feb, he refers to today's time as the '**Afternoon of Christianity**', this interview gives a good overview of that <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-12/msgr-tomas-halik-deep-reform-of-church.html>
- **From the NZCBC:** Archbishop of Wellington Paul Martin, SM, Wairarapa parish Priest Fr Dennis Nacorda, and Auckland Vicar for Māori Manuel Beazley share their experiences of the Holy Father's Synod on Synodality in Rome last October. Watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COKdE6mlojU>
- **Synodal Church in Mission**– [Synthesis Report](#). Take time to read the synthesis report that all dioceses around the world are asked to reflect leading to the final gathering in Rome this October 2024.
- **The Blessing Aotearoa**–The New Zealand Christian churches, including some Catholic parishes to sing this song. A good song to play when you are leading a prayer session. https://fb.watch/pE1xjSbV_I/. Thank you to Susan Apathy for sharing.
- Lenten Reflection by **Pope Francis** "**Through the Desert God Leads us to Freedom**" <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/20231203-messaggio-quaresima2024.html>



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BIRTHDAYS



UPDATES



Re-run of Joe Green's seminar on sacramental programmes

Joe Green, Lay Pastoral Leader of St Francis Ohariu, ran for the 2nd time a seminar on lay-led and facilitated sacramental programmes on 10 February 2024 at the St Francis parish hall. This time we had Candidates Jude McKee, Vicky Raw, and Rutger Keijser in attendance. Joining them was Parish Priest Fr. Gerry Burns, Assistant Parish Priest Alfred Tong (not in pictures). Robyn Radomski, the parish lay minister for the Bereavement Ministry dropped by as guest speaker. As always, we had a great discussion and fellowship. Thank you Joe for generous wisdom.

Farewelling Cardinal Tom Williams and Msgr. Charles Cooper



Coming together for Msgr Charles Cooper. From the right: Barbara Rowley, LPL of Te Awakairangi Parish, Mika Teofilo former LPL of the Samoan Chaplaincy, Christine Walkerdine, current Parish Engagement Coordinator for Church Mission and Mrs Ann Williams, sister-in-law of Cardinal Tom.

Recently we farewelled two great men of God who supported the mission and ministry of Te Hao Nui- Launch Out. Cardinal Tom Williams, the instigator of the 1998 Synod that created the ministry of the Lay Pastoral Leader and later, Launch Out. Charles Cooper was one of the first clergymen to work collaboratively with a Lay Pastoral Leader. Their vigils and requiem were moments of gathering of many graduates and a marking of an important historical moment for Launch Out. Joan McFetridge, former formator, came all the way from Tauranga for Tom's requiem. Former Lay Pastoral Leaders like Cushla Quigan and Sharon Penny came for Charles' vigil and requiem. The feelings were mixed, we were saddened by their passing, but there was also a joyful spirit of celebrating their lives and achievements.

In the company of saints



This year Te Hao Nui- Launch Out is blessed to be able to keep using the facilities of the Home of Compassion Centre in Island Bay for our Prayer Days and Pastoral Development Days. This gift is totally unexpected and a big surprise. In Sr Sue Cosgrove's words 'You (Te Hao Nui) are the future'. A big thank you to the Sisters of Compassion for your generosity and for believing in us. Thank you Mother Aubert.

The Sisters of Compassion's generosity reminds us that we walk this sacred hikoī in the company of saints through the religious orders in the Archdiocese of Wellington: Mother Aubert of the Sisters of Compassion, Jean-Claude Colin of the Marist Fathers, St. Therese de Courdec of the Cenacle Sisters, Blessed Nano Nagle of the Presentation sisters, Blessed Catherine McAuley of the Mercy Sisters and many others.

We are not alone in this sacred hikoī.



The surprise pope

The Pontificate of Pope Francis

Bridget Taumoepeau
Pastoral Mentor

March 13, 2024, marks the 11th anniversary of the election of Pope Francis as Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church.

On his election, there was much talk of the ‘firsts’ – first Jesuit; first from South America; first called Francis etc. He was also primarily a pastor, never having worked for the Roman Curia, had never studied in Rome and was reputed to dislike his visits to Rome, always hurrying back to his beloved Buenos Aires. In particular, he was shocked by the way the Synods of Bishops were run, when he had, unexpectedly, to lead the Synod in 2001.

Now is an opportunity to look at how the pontificate has developed over the years and the direction in which Francis has taken, or tried to take, the Church. As well as being what could be seen as an outsider, Francis was faced with the unusual situation of having a Pope Emeritus, not just in Rome, but in Vatican City, to whom he always showed respect and kindness, despite the efforts of some in the church to manufacture a rift between the two men and their teachings.

Simplicity was probably the first thing that struck us. This was evident even on his first appearance on the balcony of St Peter’s with no elaborate vestments, referring to himself as the Bishop of Rome and asking for a blessing from those gathered in the square. We then learnt that he had chosen to stay in Santa Marta, rather than the papal apartments; one reason for which was to be available to everyone, rather than have his visitors scrutinised and ‘filtered’. Liturgically he continues to prefer the simple, and is often seen wearing the vestments he brought from Argentina.

And then the documents started to be published – the first one to be written by him alone (as opposed to having been started by Pope Benedict XVI) was *Evangelium Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel* – an Apostolic Exhortation, written within the first year of his pontificate. It is considered to be an outline of his programme for the church, its subtitle being ‘*On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*’. The beautiful prayer to Mary, at the end sums up his wish to ‘bring to all the Gospel of life, which triumphs over death’. This prayer is worth studying, as it mentions many of the themes he has since developed - humility; joy; urgency; evangelisation; the comfort of the resurrection; courage; beauty; listening; contemplation; avoiding being closed off; service; love of the poor; the peripheries.

Since then we have received many significant writings illustrating his concerns about the world and the Church – *Laudato Si*, and later *Laudate Deum*, on the responsibility of all for the care of creation, which acknowledged the work of Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew; *Amoris Laetitia* on love in the family; *Fratelli Tutti* on fraternity and social friendship; *Christus Vivit* to young people and the entire people of God; *Gaudete et Exsultate* on the call to holiness in today’s world; *Querida Amazonia*, also related to integral ecology, as well as the role of indigenous peoples and inculturation; *Desiderio Desideravi* on the liturgical formation of the people of God; *Praedicate Evangelium* on the reform of the Roman Curia and its service to the Church in the world.

This latter document was an example, along with the reform of the Vatican Bank and other structures, of Francis’ philosophy that the Church, and especially those in positions of power, must be servant leaders.



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As well as these formal documents, there are endless sources of teaching and wisdom - talks at the General Audiences and other occasions; the brief but meaningful homilies and off the cuff discussions with various groups and individuals. On several occasions he has undertaken long interviews, the contents of which have formed the bases of published books.

It is an almost impossible task to sum up Francis' impact on the Church and beyond. Many books and articles have been written, and surely more will come. One way is to look at various themes that stem from the Second Vatican Council, which he vigorously promotes. These would include the promotion of the laity; the importance of Scripture; ecumenism and interfaith relationships, especially with the other Abrahamic faiths. Pope John XXIII was quite clear that VCI would be a pastoral council – not debating doctrinal issues, but looking at 'The Church in the Modern World' and Francis is insistent that we must now put the wisdom of VCI into practice. This, in turn, has led him into clashes with the traditional arm of the Church, which has been reluctant to make changes.

There has been a marked change in the 'tone' of what we receive from the Vatican. Rules and regulations have

been replaced by compassionate and conciliatory statements. From instructions about how to deal with people coming to the sacrament of reconciliation, to his letter to Cardinal Fernandes when he was appointed head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith – 'to guard the teaching that flows from the faith in order to give reasons for our hope, but not as an enemy who critiques and condemns.' He goes on to say that the Dicastery had previously used 'immoral methods', seeking out 'possible doctrinal errors'. A reminder to us of its origins in the Inquisition.

This compassionate attitude also drives

his care for the LGBTQ community and others traditionally marginalised within the Church, and the encouragement to offer all people blessings, as laid out in *Fiducia Supplicans*, expressed in his statement that the Church is open to everyone "todos, todos, todos." His first visit outside Rome was to Lampedusa, thus highlighting the issue of migration and the tragedy of so many being lost on the journey. He has gone on to visit other refugee camps throughout the world and to implore world leaders against war and violence. He reminded us of the emergence of a 'culture of indifference' which is the antithesis of mercy.

One word that is often used by Francis is 'peripheries', by which he means not only geographical distances, but all those on the margins for various reasons. He is insistent that the doors of the Church should be open and welcoming. He has chosen to visit many countries, many of them small, or apparently insignificant, or with small Catholic populations. During those visits he has very much supported indigenous populations and promoted inculturation. And his appointment of cardinals has illustrated his recognition of the Universal Church and the importance of all being represented.

Early in his pontificate he instigated The Year of Mercy reminding us that 'Mercy is the name of God.' Holy Doors were opened; the attention of the whole world was drawn to the idea and importance of mercy; and Francis modelled Matthew 25 by making surprise visits to those often ignored by the world – the elderly; addicts; prisoners; orphaned children; women who had been trafficked; as well as some frowned on by the Church, such as priests who had left the priesthood to get married. All this reminded us, and continues to do so, that actions often speak louder than words.

In his support of the laity, recognising VCI's promotion of the people of God – all the baptised, he has tackled what he considers the scourge of clericalism – again raising the ire of many in the church who have perpetuated the division between the lay and the ordained. Francis has been concerned about the formation of priests and specific in his criticism of young seminarians. It is enough," the pope lamented, "to go into the ecclesiastical tailor shops in Rome to see the scandal of young priests trying on cassocks and hats, or albs and lace robes." Conversely, he has promoted the role of women in the Church, including several within the Curia, although the thorny question of female permanent deacons is still to be resolved. Women have also been heavily involved in tackling the issue of abuse. The current Synod of Bishops on Synodality includes about 50 women, who are full voting members of the assembly, which has never happened before.

Like the rest of the world, Francis was confronted with the Covid pandemic. As a previous medical scientist, he found it quite easy to meld science and faith, and he promoted the use of vaccines, recognising vaccination as a gift of love to each other – an expression of working for the common good. His prayerfulness and particular devotion to Mary was evident in his extraordinary prayer service for the end of the pandemic, as a lone figure in the rain in St Peter's Square, joined virtually by millions around the world.

Another area that Francis has been open about tackling is the abuse crisis within the church. He has demonstrated much more openness than previous popes about dealing with this. The meeting in 2019 in Rome was a good example of this, where the pope and church leaders from across the world met openly to express their guilt and penitence about this tragedy within the Church. However, things have not gone smoothly, an expression of the depth of the problem, as well as its complexity. Many of the difficulties are probably due to the lack of qualified staff in the Vatican; the glacial slowness of procedures within the Curia; the reluctance to accept the enormity of the problem; the tradition of protecting the reputation of the Church at all costs and the emotional nature of the situation, which has often made collaboration between survivors, lay experts and the Church very difficult.

And so, we come to today – Francis is now quite disabled, having had some major operations and being wheel chair bound the majority of the time. However, it is obvious that he still greatly enjoys being amongst people, perhaps especially the poor and the young. The Synod on Synodality continues, shaking us up in the way that we see the Church and how we can all be part of the communion, participation and mission.

Francis, like all reformers, has suffered criticism and what could be seen as a rise in schismatic movements. He has borne these bravely and patiently, often utilising silence as a mechanism to prevent further escalation of divisive discussions. He walks a tightrope, particularly in the age of synodality, between consultation and decision making, the difficulty of reconciling '*cum Petro et sub Petro*' (with Peter and under Peter). While we can contribute to discussions and have opinions, in the end the Pope has to make decisions. His statements, *Fiducia Supplicans* (on blessings) and *Traditionis Custodes* (restricting the use of the Latin Mass) could be criticised for being published without much consultation. To his critics it should be pointed out that these statements did not alter issues of faith, but addressed the application of faith and liturgy to our everyday lives.

However, we give thanks for the gift of Francis - a surprise Pope who has challenged us; brought us closer to the Gospel and will leave us with a legacy of teachings and examples that will forever affect our relationship with God and each other. Deo gratias.

[My thanks to Cardinal John Dew, who has shared with me his knowledge of, and friendship with, Pope Francis, greatly contributing to the content of this article. However, I take full responsibility for any opinions expressed herein.]



*Dear Brother Francis**

Congratulations on the anniversary of your election on 13 March, 2013. I remember that event very clearly, as I had been closely following the conclave, so was awake in the early morning when the white smoke was noted, and you were announced as our new Papa. Your appearance on the balcony of St Peter's contained many clues about what we could expect from your papacy, but the one thing that brought tears to my eyes, was your choice of name. Not just the fact that no one had chosen Francis before, but that particular choice – of a humble saint, who was not a priest, and who had been asked by God to 'repair my church', was significant to say the least.

You, yourself, explained your choice of name, noting that the request by the cardinals had been for a reformer pope, but also explaining that St Francis of Assisi was a man of peace and a lover of God's creation and of the poor.

And so, you have taken us on a rollercoaster ride. You have been called the pope of surprises, but you yourself have often reminded us that God is a God of surprises. Often when things are rather quiet in the church, or I am wondering what direction we are taking, you suddenly produce another statement or document that focusses again on what we need to be thinking and doing, as we practice our faith.

You have tackled areas not previously addressed, such as your encyclical *Laudato Si'* and later its follow up, *Laudate Deum*. You have laid out your thoughts and teaching about our faith in *Evangelii Gaudium*; you have taught us how to relate to each other in *Amoris Laetitia*, *Fratelli Tutti*, *Vivit Christus*, *Querida Amazonia*, *Fiducia Supplicans*. Your weekly appearances at the General Audience and Sunday Angelus have become must-see events on the weekly calendar.

Perhaps more than your formal writings, the way you conduct yourself has been your best form of teaching. After all, you have told us that we will win hearts and minds by attraction, not proselytization. Much was made of your modest approach to your living arrangements, as well as to liturgical matters. (I still love seeing you wear the simple chasuble and mitre that you brought with you from Argentina, and which you seem to choose on significant occasions.)

More importantly, however, we have seen your frustration over the difficulty the Church has had in incorporating change; in the adherence of many to rules and regulations, rather than to the spirit of the Gospel message; your practical approach to rooting out corruption; your willingness to address difficult issues such as abuse; your distress over war and violence; your affection for people, especially the young; your tenderness to those who are suffering; your practical approach to need, such as setting up showers and medical clinics for the homeless; your constant reference to the scriptures, with challenging homilies or reflections; your insistence that we not only familiarise ourselves with the Second Vatican Council, but that we implement all its reforms; your example of simple devotion to Our Lady and St Joseph; your promotion of the role of women in the Church; your ability to forgive, or at least keep quiet about, insults that you have endured; your willingness to review how you are doing things, such as the changes in the way the Synod on Synodality was to be run; your perseverance, despite your health difficulties. And so the list goes on. Everyone will have different experiences of what has touched them in your teaching, or what has made them have a rethink about the way they see their faith.

As you will see, I am an admirer. I am so grateful for the way you have brought back a spark into my faith journey, which was in danger of stagnation. However, dear Papa Francesco, I have a couple of minor complaints – your sense of urgency means that you have presented us with so much to consider, that it is a full-time job keeping up with you; and the challenges you set us can almost overwhelm.

Despite that, I offer you sincere congratulations, not just on the fact that it is 11 years that you have led us, but for the love of God and Mother Church that you have demonstrated and the energy, love and compassion that you have devoted to the task.

Your sister in Christ, Bridget



* 'Brother Francis' was the way the Pope was addressed, at the Penitential Meeting on abuse in the church, in the Vatican on 19 March, 2019, by Sr Veronica Openiho, Nigerian leader of the Society of the Child Jesus, and member of the executive of the International Union of Superiors General.