

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,  
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ



**Reflections – Summer 2023**

Dear Fathers, dear Brothers,

During the weeks of August, I have read and rested. I did not go to Lisbon for World Youth Day. But I thank most sincerely those of you who did, and through you the young people too.

However, I did follow the WYD events, on our website and through various reports. Some of its themes and my own summer reading have provoked some reflections which I want to offer to you as we pick up a more demanding tempo again.

Speaking in Lisbon to bishops, priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and pastoral workers, Pope Francis touched on the weariness we may feel at times and the need for fresh encouragement. He spoke of the Lord's invitation to Peter and his companions to go back to their task and once again to 'put out their nets' (Luke 5:2). Then he said:

'When we become creatures of habit and grow bored, and the mission becomes a "job", it is time to open our hearts to that second call of Jesus, for he never stops calling us. He calls us to make us set out; he calls us to remake us. Do not be afraid of this second call of Jesus. It is no illusion: he keeps knocking on our door.'

So here we go again.

It was in this context that the Pope made his urgent appeal: that the Church is for everyone: 'todos, todos, todos!' He said:

'Dear brothers and sisters: to all of you, laity, religious, priests and bishops, to one and all I say, do not be afraid, let down the nets. Do not go about hurling accusations – telling people, "this is a sin" or "this is not a sin". Let everyone come, we can talk later, but first, they should hear the invitation of Jesus; repentance comes later, closeness to Jesus comes later. Please, do not turn the Church into a customs house: there the righteous, peoples whose lives are in order, those properly married, can enter, while everyone else remains outside. No. That is not the Church. Righteous and sinners, good and bad: everyone, everyone, everyone. And then, may the Lord help us to straighten things out ... everyone!'

Not surprisingly, this was challenged by a journalist during the in-flight press conference, pointing out to the Pope that some are not permitted to receive Holy Communion and others feel obstructed by the Church in other ways. His reply was forthright:

‘You ask me a question that concerns two different points of view: the Church is open to everyone, then there is legislation that regulates life inside the Church. He who is inside follows the legislation. What you say is a simplification: “They cannot participate in the sacraments.” This does not mean that the Church is closed. Everyone meets God on their own way inside the Church, and the Church is the mother and guides everyone on their own path ... Everyone, everyone in prayer, in inner dialogue, in pastoral dialogue, looks for the way forward ... There is a kind of gaze that doesn’t understand this insertion of the Church as mother and thinks of it as a kind of "corporation" that you have to do this, or do it in this way and not another way, in order to get in ... I don’t like reduction. This is not ecclesial; it is gnostic. It is like a Gnostic heresy that is somewhat fashionable today. A certain Gnosticism that reduces ecclesial reality, and that doesn’t help. The Church is “mother” receiving everyone, and everyone makes their own way within the Church, without publicity, and this is very important.’

In many ways, this approach is nothing new. There are many aspects of our traditions in which more ‘space’ was available in the regular practices of the Church for those who are ‘on their own path’: less emphasis on the reception of Holy Communion as a mark of belonging; more ‘styles’ of prayer and liturgy which are prayerful and devotional. I think this was seen and experienced in Lisbon: the dramatic Stations of the Cross; the recitation of the Rosary; the time of silent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament of which one young man said that for him it was a time of intensely intimate prayer yet in the company of 1.5 million young people. He learned that his prayer is both deeply personal and yet never alone, always in the company of the Church.

The journey of the World Youth Day pilgrimage has been for many a journey from the edges of faith to its heart: the meeting with Jesus. This is the pathway by which the Church becomes a Church for all.

To become more aware of the patterns and shape of this invitation, perhaps we need to turn to an exploration and discussion of the ‘borderlands’ between committed faith and its initial impulses. Theologically, this means more attention being given to the ‘*praeambula fidei*’, (understood as the passive intellect’s disposition for the articles of faith). Perhaps this is where some of our pastoral/missionary outreach has to begin today.

Two books I read in recent weeks highlighted how today’s secular mindset is, in fact, open to the invitation of faith. One is somewhat lyrical. The author, George Mackay Brown, writes that the burden of living is meaningless ‘unless we predicate another self, a real self, a soul, that is seeking life-long for a true treasure, a grail ... The trouble is this pilgrim is hidden most of the time, only glimpsed now and again at moments of great distress or joy.’ (George Mackay Brown, *Beside the Ocean of Time*).

He continues: ‘The body laments, the body dances; from somewhere deep within, in the heart’s heart, or from beyond the furthest star, the good angel, the guardian, is playing on his pipe. The music goes on and on, unheard for the most part. Through this lifetime of vanity we creep, stumble, march, follow plough and scythe ... until at last the feet are folded and lie still: but, seen through the angel’s eyes, it is an immortal spirit that dances from birth to death, all the way, from before the beginning till after the end. Every dance, every lifetime, is unique ... but the music will not be known in all its glory until it is rounded with silence.’

It is, of course, our privilege as priests to be given trusted access to such moments of distress and joy. At those moments the pilgrim is glimpsed and the beauty of the dance can become fleetingly clear. At moments such as these, whether at a baptism, wedding or funeral, or in the

supermarket or at the school gate, we put out the nets and invite a further step towards the fullness of faith.

Another author captured in a single sentence what may be one of the first steps towards faith for people today. She wrote:

‘You need not believe in the gods to believe in your own soul. It is a part of you that feels not obliged to materiality. I do not know if the soul survives physical death - and I do not care - but I know that to lose your soul while you are alive is worse than death. I want to protect my soul’. (Jeanette Winterson in an Afterword to *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd).

To be ‘not obliged to materiality’ is a sensibility, maybe a longing, within every person. I am sure that it is this longing that brings many a ‘casual’ visitor to our churches and is present in many conversations with and between our parishioners in whatever circumstances they may take place.

These are some of the starting points for the conversations which are the first steps of evangelisation and accompaniment. They are conversations in which everyone can be encouraged to engage. This, too, is not new. How well I remember my mother, in the last stages of her illness, going around the hospital ward talking to everyone, establishing contact and first points of encouragement in a radical trust in God. This is our first work of proclaiming the Gospel. After all, in the Biblical revelation, the proclamation of Jesus is the ‘last chapter’. We are often wise to begin at first, with the simple wonder that so many find in the glory of creation or in the hunger of their own souls.

The Pope, in his media reply, also spoke of the need for ‘pastoral dialogue’, ‘looking for a way forward’, ‘straightening things out’. This is the heart of the work of pastoral accompaniment, and I thank you for all you do in this regard. ‘Straightening things out’ is never easy. Here are just one or two key points.

Pope Francis has often emphasised the importance of ‘helping each person find his or her own proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus experience being touched by an unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy’ (*Amoris Laetitia* 279), especially those who, left to themselves, may feel excluded or alienated from the Church. He has stated that it is never sufficient to simply apply universal norms as the only criterion for discerning the pathway towards God (*Amoris Laetitia* 291). Equally, it is not permissible to propose that any of those steps, emerging from particular discernment of the present state of a soul, and dependent on the work of mercy and grace in a concrete situation, be ‘elevated to the level of a rule’ (*Amoris Laetitia* 304). This is what some wish to do, arguing that the strength of their experience ought to be sufficient for it to be incorporated into a new normative teaching of the Church.

A rereading of the key sections of *Amoris Laetitia* and *Evangelii Gaudium* can be helpful with their emphasis on ‘accompaniment’ requiring of us a reverence towards each person’s situation before God and towards their life of grace as ‘mysteries which no one can know fully from without’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 172). This, he says, precedes the moral norm of law, and evokes in us ‘a certain dread’, rather than any assured judgement.

As I think again about my mother, another contemporary phrase comes to mind: she was certainly an ‘intentional disciple’. She was at the heart of a parish community, part of that core of those committed to the everyday practice of the faith. Indeed, we know that no parish can be truly missionary without such a core of well-formed and dedicated members.

We are all familiar with this current emphasis and the strands of formation being offered to strengthen the people within our parishes today. Yet what is less clear is how this emphasis on a radical formation of the few interacts with the openness to all called for by the Pope. Such openness can be both served and hindered by the desire for thorough discipleship and a profound formation of intention and commitment. Hindrance can come when any programme or initiative is perceived or experienced as setting the desired standard for everyone; or when the initiative is seen as being its own 'raison d'être'. On the other hand, service can come in as much as the initiatives constantly see themselves at the service of 'everyone', and able to adapt, or be adapted, to the circumstances of place and time. This, too, we must continue to explore and develop.

Now I come to my last point in these reflections.

Each of the books I have quoted above was sharply focused on a single place: in one the Cairngorms (*The Living Mountain*) and in the other an island in the Orkneys (*Beside the Ocean of Time*). Each explored and expounded in great detail the features, beauties and hazards of a single place and its way of life. As one commentator observed, *The Living Mountain* needs to be understood as 'parochial', taking 'parochial' not in the pejorative sense of insularity, boundedness or of a community turned inward on itself, but rather on seeing 'the parish not as a perimeter but as an aperture: a space through which the world could be seen'. He continues: 'Parochialism is universal. It deals with universals' and in a way that does not confuse 'the general' with the 'universal'. The general can be broad, vague and undiscerned. The universal consists of 'the fine-tuned principles, induced from an intense concentration on the particular'. In other words, 'we learn by scrutiny of the close at hand'.

I add this because it points to the crucial importance of the discernment of a perceptive parish priest in the well-being of the parish and its development. The balance between outreach to those barely in touch by their own spiritual hunger on the one hand and, on the other, a concentration on the programmes of deeper formation, is best made at a local level, in local circumstances and conditions. But what is crucial in this discernment is the cooperation between priests and parishioners. And this, of course, brings us to the theme of synodality.

So much is being written on this topic, and we now await the first of two Synods of Bishops on this theme. I thank those who have engaged with the process so far, which is both fruitful and easily misunderstood. The Pastoral Letter that accompanies these reflections tries to give a focus on what lies ahead.

With these thoughts in mind, I return to the full range of my responsibilities and activities. Please keep me in your prayers as I most certainly keep you in mine.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. To the left of the first name, there is a small cross symbol.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols  
Archbishop of Westminster

2 September 2023