

## The Parish that Pope Francis Envisions<sup>1</sup>

Address to Archdiocese of Cape Town Ecclesia Faith Festival Day - 29 August 2015  
Russell Pollitt, S.J.

Pope Francis has said a number of things, over the last few years, in documents like *Evangelii Gaudium*, interviews, speeches and Wednesday Audiences about the unit we call the “Parish.”

Seems clear to me that, for Francis, the heart of the Church is the Parish – not surprising he talks about it often!

Preface what I am going to say by 5 preliminary remarks:

1. Francis, unlike John Paul II and Benedict, has much more experience of the parish and parish life. Years working in Argentina as a priest and also as bishop of the diocese. Parish was a real locale for many people in Argentina – perhaps a bit like township parishes in SA during Apartheid. He therefore says that the parish is “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters” (EV #28) Parish as part and parcel of daily life of the community – involved – active.
2. Parish, for Francis, is the “centre of missionary outreach” (ibid). I think, by this, Francis means that the parish is the primary place from where we make the Lord known. He suggests that this is done, first, by going out and making the Lord known – not waiting for them to come to us! “Missionary” means taking the initiative – becoming involved “in word and deed in people’s daily lives” (EV #24) This, for Francis, means that we can never be satisfied with where things are. He talks about our missionary role as one in which we “advance along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are.” EV #25). Some parishes have become places, which are more identified with administration or have become “admin centres”. Francis warns against this saying it is not enough and that we must be “permanently in a state of mission.” (EV #25)
3. He calls it a “sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey.” He sees parishes as places of “living communion and participation.” Going out *but* also places where people can come. (Ev #28) We have often heard this Pope speak

---

<sup>1</sup> Reflections on *Evangelii Gaudium*. This is NOT for publication.

of being welcoming and open – he wants us to go out but also create communities that are welcoming – inviting.

4. Pope Francis sees parishes as communities that are flexible – able to adapt to changing missionary needs. But notice that he also says that because of the missionary outreach the parish will be a place where **we** are constantly capable of self-renewal and adaptivity. The missionary itself is in need of constant conversion. This is done, he says, through constant review and renewal. He encourages the Church – parishes/diocese etc. – to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform. Notice too that he warns against - what I think is the biggest single challenge we have in parishes and in our Churches – a “complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’.” He invites the whole Church to the task of “rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation...” (EV #38) Discernment for Francis is key – much misunderstood though too I think!
5. Francis sees the parish not as an end in itself but part of the mission of the local Church and the universal Church. Not islands but community amongst communities. He calls parishes to missionary conversion but also the local church and indeed the papacy to missionary conversion. So, the parish goes out and is missionary as part of the whole, the diocese goes out and is missionary as part of the whole... Not kingdoms or fiefdoms!

One the basis of those preliminaries: what kind of parish does Francis envision? I suggest 8 things... not new to us but so often we don't get it right!

1. **Listening:** In February this year Francis visited the southern Italian diocese of Isernia-Venafro. Francis spoke of the parish as “a privileged place of listening and of the proclamation of the Gospel.” Seems to me that this is an excellent place to start. A place of listening – listening to everyone, listening to their stories, listening to their needs, listening to their pains and listening to their joys. In May 2013 the Pope warned in a homily that parishes are not to be like “customs houses” who establish an eighth sacrament. He said: “They insist on protocol instead of seeking to meet spiritual needs.” We find it hard to listen – we think we have the answers – Francis wants us to listen to *everyone* – even the

categories of people we are not accustomed to listening to. Why? People's stories tell us about where they are, what they need, how we can be the best missionaries to them. Listening empowers us, teaches us what is needed. Often we think we know.... Great temptation. How do we do this? Francis in EV #28 tells us "contact with the homes and lives of its people" so that it does not become a "useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed cluster made up of a chosen few." Discernment. Forums for listening? PPC and pastor listen? Open days to listen? Surveys? House visits?

2. **Welcoming, inclusive place.** Describes us as a "mother with an open heart" (EV #46). Francis says, "Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason." He goes on to say that the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but nourishment for the weak. He says we need to be prudent and bold. We are not to act as arbiters of grace but rather its facilitators. In a powerful image Francis says that the Church is not a toll house (e-toll) but house of the Father where there is a place for everyone with all their problems. The pope repeats his vision for all of us in EV #49 – one I am sure you have heard! (Read... #49) What does this mean – make us nervous that we "throwing baby out with bath water"? NO. I don't think so. Our disposition that's NB here – difference between doing all we can and doing nothing... Sometimes there are circumstances, for e.g. when something may not be right for someone – how we do this NB. General Audience (25 September 2013) Francis said: "Let each one ask him - or herself today 'do I increase harmony in my family, in my parish, in my community or am I a gossip. Am I a cause of division or embarrassment? Gossip does harm! Gossip wounds. Before Christians open their mouths to gossip, they should bite their tongue! To bite one's tongue: this does us good because the tongue swells and can no longer speak, cannot gossip. Am I humble enough to patiently stitch up, through sacrifice, the open wounds in communion?'" A welcoming, inclusive community builds people up – whoever they are. Mercy is so crucial to this. Love and mercy changes people's hearts, not exclusion and rules. Year of Mercy.
3. **Parish where there is participation:** get laity involved! "Parish that does not have a Pastoral Council or Finance Council is not a

good parish: it lacks life!” But I think we need to go further than PPC and PFC. How can we truly involve as many people as possible in our parish communities? Often, a few people do many things, how do we get many people involved? How do we help people “own” our communities and therefore want to contribute, allow themselves to be formed/transformed and therefore become zealous to do the same. My experience is that the more welcoming you make things the more people are willing to get involved. Think of creative ways of building community. Admin of parish – lay people expertise in this so let them do it. Let priest be free for mission. More people the better and more vibrant. Baptism.

4. **Preaching:** Parishes as centres where God’s word is spoken and preached well. Preaching... It’s a delicate topic but one that we have to face up to. I think, and I am one of them, that our preaching is well below par. Often bares no relation to people’s lives and daily experience. Often is a moral treatise... Sitting in benches now as I am not a PP makes me really feel despondent. Parish must be a place where God’s word is preached well – Francis said this a few times. Must feed people – not put them to sleep! Preaching is not catechism, meditation but a dialogue between God and God’s people. Addresses this at length in EV #135-139. Pope says that homily is not about pointing out what we shouldn’t have done but suggesting what we can do better. Preaching should inspire, offer hope, point to the future and not leave us trapped in negativity – bored – asleep! He encourages people to be involved in preaching... Feedback... sharing... studying together... Also think we need to involve more people in teaching future priests to preach... lay people with expertise. I am beginning to think, more and more, that poor or bad preaching can no longer be excused. It’s our core business – proclamation of the Word.
5. **Worship/Liturgy is done well:** Francis says: “In some people we see an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time” (EV #95). He goes on to say that if we do this we turn the Church into a museum... He is not saying that we should not do liturgy well! He is saying it must be done well but that its *primary objective is mission* – making God known and

not for our own pleasure or self indulgence. So many places we are so busy fighting liturgical wars that mission doesn't even feature! Francis wants a parish where worship/liturgy is done well – well prepared, well executed – that keeps us united with the universal Church – but that is not an end within itself. Liturgy should lead us to missionary zeal – real life, contact with real people and their daily bread - and not into some magical feel good, self-indulgent world.

6. **Poor:** Special place for the poor “inseparable bond between our faith and poor” (EV #48). I think it's as simple as saying that we cannot live the Gospel if we do not interact with/care for/are concerned about the poor. “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society” (EV #187). Francis has some strong views about this – he goes on to say: “Without the preferential option for the poor, ‘the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today's society of mass communications’” (#199). Every parish community must have a ministry to the marginalised – whoever that is – materially poor, elderly, divorced, remarried, gay, children... I think that the materially poor, especially, teach us all lessons. Thus Francis insistence on this. I recently heard of a rather upmarket parish in JHB that cancelled their soup kitchen because the street people left the toilets dirty – that's precisely the parish we DO NOT want!
7. **Prophetic.** Francis, I think, wants Catholic Social Teaching to be more widely known and lived. Much emphasise on the social dimensions of Christian living. He says “Christian conversion demands reviewing especially those areas and aspects of life related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good.” (EV #182) He goes on to say that an authentic faith involves a deep desire to change the world and transmit values, to leave the earth somehow better than we found it. He says that the just ordering of society and the state is a central responsibility of politics but that the Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice (EV #183). How do we involve our parishes in the local issue – whatever those are. Parish – sewerage in streets just down road from Church and school kids having to go through. Why parish not acting? Build bonds solidarity with

others of good will – act for local community. Relationships with police, community organisations etc. all for common good. Solidarity.

8. **Personal relationship with Jesus Christ:** – not to a set of doctrines or rules but first and foremost living relationship/encounter with Jesus Christ. I think that Francis is absolutely convinced that if we, first, show people and teach them to have a relationship with Jesus, with the living God, then we are on the right track. He does not disregard teachings/morality/doctrine but, I think, sees them as a natural outcome of that personal relationship. Encounter/relationship first! So often in parishes we are worried about the amount of doctrine we teach etc... Endless meetings we talk about this - I have never heard people worry about the personal relationship with Jesus and talk about that! It is clear, I think, that Francis has this with Jesus and wants others to share this – that's where his own joy comes from, I am convinced – his personal encounter/relationship with Jesus. We must do the same.