



WAKE UP THE WORLD: LIVING OUR PROPHETIC WITNESS THROUGH THE EYES OF THE POOR

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My Dear Brothers,

Fratelli Tutti!

I am grateful to you for inviting me to share some thoughts on Pope Francis' challenge to religious a few months after his election to the Papacy. I have titled this sharing, "Through the Eyes of the Poor," because I believe that is how we jolt our world into reality. My own world exploded into focus when last year we saw the millions of daily wage earners in big cities making the long journey home to their villages during the lockdown imposed without warning. It was heart-rending. That is not how God intended things to be. The poverty that lies just below the surface of big cities was laid bare by the pandemic. This is when we hear the cry of the poor and are moved to action. The Gospel is good news only when it is seen through the eyes of the poor.

It was his awareness of such a world that led the Pope to say:

"The Church, therefore, must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up."

[Pope Francis to USG November 2013]

When leadership is awakened to call for such change, there is no knowing where this will lead us. Pope Francis felt the call deep within him and we are seeing the deep changes that are unfolding in our church. It is always thus when we are true to the voice within us. As leaders when we make bold utterances that come from our hearts, we free similar urges in people around us. I speak from experience.

To get a glimpse of the Pope's mind, we move to the pre-conclave gathering in which he spoke to the assembled Cardinals. "In Revelation, Jesus says that he is standing at the threshold and calling. Evidently the text refers to the fact that he stands outside the door and knocks to enter.... But at times I think that Jesus may be knocking from the inside, that we might let him out. The self-referential Church presumes to keep Jesus Christ within itself and not let him out." We have enclosed Jesus in doctrines, laws, rites, temples, episcopal palaces and structures of the past. We have held Jesus prisoner for centuries in the Western, medieval, feudal, church of Christendom. Jesus has been locked in ecclesial structures that distance him from the poor and simple people, from children and women, from peasants and fishermen, from migrants and refugees, from all those who in all cultures and religions seek the truth.

Also significant is the fact that when it became obvious that he had gained the majority of votes needed to become Pope, he was embraced by Cardinal Claudio Hummes who said to him, "Don't forget the poor!" He took that as a Divine reminder.

His choice of the name Francis after the poor man from Assisi is also significant: *Il Poverello*, the little poor man who revolutionised the Church in the early 13th Century, the one who woke up the world of his times and who set about to repair the church, was the model for Jorge Bergoglio. When you see the Gospel through the eyes of the poor, you begin to see the extent of the damage that the institutional church causes. It is not speaking to the poor nor it is offering good news to them. Francis recognises this and is setting out to re-model the church as good news.

At the same USG meeting in November 2013 he said, “I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the centre but rather from the periphery.”

“I would prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” (EG 49)

He quotes Pedro Arrupe, the prophetic Superior General of his own Jesuit Order, who said that some time of real contact with the poor was necessary, to spend time walking on the periphery in order to become acquainted with the reality and life-experiences of people.

My dear brothers, all these instances make it clear that Pope Francis is inviting the Church into the space occupied by the early followers of Jesus of Nazareth. He sees the world differently from his immediate predecessors. I would like us to enter the mind of this Pope who invites us to wake up the world. I believe that he is reminding us that humanity has forgotten its role and its soul. In this he is like Jesus of Nazareth.

The very first words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, the first Gospel to be written, are: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the good news.” The word in the Greek text for repent is the imperative from the root word, *metanoia*. It means ‘change the way you think’, ‘change your mindset’, ‘change the way you perceive’. It is an invitation to a constant way of living, of being open to the newness that God is continually bringing into the world. And the underlying implication is this: If you cannot change the way you perceive reality, if you cannot change the way our dominant culture sees reality, you do not know the good news.

Jesus was constantly changing the way people saw and experienced life. He never came to give us a new religion. He came to tell us that life could be lived differently, that human values could be different, that human relationships could be different. That is why Bonhoeffer could say that Jesus of Nazareth turns upside down everything that religious people think about God. That is also why Jesus invites his followers to be fishers of men and women. To take fish out of water is to endanger their survival. The disciples take people out of their comfort zones. They wake them up!

But waking them up presupposes that people are asleep. The Pope is calling us to realise that we are like Zombies going through life. We are sleepwalking through life. Look at how we treat our planet! Look at how we treat marginalised people! Look at how we tolerate racism and ignore refugees! Art and Literature keep reminding us that we are being controlled by “Big Brother” and let ourselves live sedated lives. I see this so strongly in my country where the media, judiciary and administration are mere mouthpieces of the government.

Late twentieth-century filmmakers have repeatedly portrayed how artificial intelligence has overtaken the human species, has managed to control us in an alternate reality in which all our experiences are actually a programme. Those of humanity that accept their programming lead deadened, superficial lives. “*Perhaps it is the unthinking acquiescence, the blindness to one’s imprisonment, that is the most effective way for human beings to remain captive. People who do not know that they are captive will not resist their bondage.*” (Caste, Isabel Wilkerson)

Look at the way we have grown used to the many injustices of everyday. We are like the priest and Levite in the parable who pass by on the other side, as our brother or sister lies ravaged in a ditch.

We have seen, particularly in India and the United States, the tragic consequences of fake news, of deliberately twisting the truth, of spreading lies openly and with impunity.

If we are to wake up the world, as the Pope asks, we need to be awakened ourselves. It is so easy to go with the flow. I am amazed by the different movements in our world in the last few years which are challenging the way we think. At the forefront of this are young people and women. I look at the action on behalf of protecting the Planet and see the hordes of young people marching, mainly women. I see the way women are claiming their voice with hashtags of *Me Too* and *Time's Up*. I see people standing up against racism with *Black Lives Matter*. I see across the world creative ways in which people are bonding and seeking community that goes beyond ethnic and communal lines. I see calls for a more equitable distribution of the earth's resources. All this is amazing. It tells us that there is another way to live life. And all of this comes from secular society. The creative imagination is flourishing in secular society. The Spirit is alive here. The Church is silent, a mere spectator, occasionally jumping on board.

Why are we so silent – even when we know that things are wrong. In my own country our Bishops are silent as every democratic principle is being dismantled by a Fascist government. Your own Bishops are either divided or silent on the big issues of today that face your country. They join the culture wars. Why are we religious men silent? Do we also participate in the culture wars being played out by political parties? We rarely challenge our hierarchical church!

A Church that is worried about its worship, that is clinging to its own security, is a church that needs to die. A church that comforts itself by pointing to its outreach programmes and social welfare centres does not necessarily wake up the world. Do we bolster such a church, or allow it to die? Neale Donald Walsch puts this so well: "Yearning for a new way will not produce it. Only ending the old way can do that. You cannot hold onto the old all the while declaring that you want something new. The old will defy the new; the old will deny the new; the old will decry the new. There is only one way to bring in the new. You must make room for it"¹. And this means helping to dismantle what is no longer helpful.

My brothers, I believe if we are to wake ourselves up and then wake up the world, we need to look again at the vision of Jesus of Nazareth. In order to do this, we need once more to listen to our hearts. We need to spend time listening to our hearts. We spend time saying prayers, mouthing formulae, kneeling in adoration, attending ritual. While that might be helpful, we do not do what the Gospels tells us: We do not go into our inner room, lock the door and there in silence, listen to the One who dwells within. There is no way we can awaken the world without doing this. Listen again to Jesus' words and stories, pay attention to his actions. He is constantly mirroring how he sees God present in our world. And the God he reveals in all of this, is not the God we expect: a powerful, omnipresent, omniscient, Being living elsewhere. It is a God revealed as vulnerable, powerless, fully self-giving; a God of selfless loving. A God who looks at humanity without judging. This is so different from the God religion often places before us. Allow me a few moments to share some brief stories from the Gospels.

One of the most powerful stories is in the 7th Chapter of Luke's Gospel. A woman gate-crashes a party and anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. Listen to what Jesus says, speaking to the host: "Do you see this woman?" Of course, the answer is 'No!' Simon does not see the woman. He sees the sinner, the prostitute, that shameless creature making an exhibition of herself. And we? We see the coloured person or the white person, the undeserving asylum seeker, the Democrat or the Republican or the Communist, the person of a different sexual orientation, the pro-lifer or anti-lifer and so on. But we do not see the person, my brother or sister. Jesus reminds us to see the woman. That is how God sees us: the human person, struggling, suffering.... Only love is there when God looks.

You have the same thing happening in the parable of the prodigal son. No condemnation, only love – and it is emphasised through the behaviour of the elder son. No wonder Hafiz can say:

¹ Facebook Post, July 22, 2014

*There is no man on this earth
Who needs a pardon from Me—
For there is really no such thing,
No such thing
As Sin!²*

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark (Ch. 7:24 ff) lets us know in no uncertain terms that for God there are no chosen people. All are God's chosen ones. And yet we speak so much about inclusion and exclusion, us and them, who can be admitted to worship and who cannot.... How do we wake up our world? How do we give birth to such inclusive loving?

And finally on the Cross we hear those beautiful words: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!" Look at the one who says this and what he has just gone through. You and I know how shameful crucifixion was. It was seen as shameful not just because of the public pain, but because of the public shame. When the person was 'handed over' to the soldiers for crucifixion he was their plaything. He would be raped, beaten, and mocked. "Behold the man!" After all this he can say, 'forgive them!' How can I reach such a stage of loving and forgiving? Only when I learn to listen to my heart, to operate out of that centre. This is when we can awaken the world, when we can show a new face of God and tell people that there is another way to live life. Truly Jesus came not to give us a new religion, but to show us how to live life fully, differently. I have come that you may have life, life to the full! (Jn. 10:10)

It is from this point of vulnerability and brokenness and marginalisation, of recognising how our oppressive social and political systems are divisive and detrimental to humanity and the Planet, that we shake our world out of its slumber. We wake up our world by presenting a new face of God for our times, just as Jesus did.

The ball is in our court. There is no waiting for God to intervene in our world. We need to act. "Christ has no hands but yours...." John Dominic Crossan puts it so well: "We are waiting for God's intervention, but God is waiting for our collaboration." This is how we wake up our world. Hence the Pope's challenge to us religious.

² *I heard God laughing, poems of Hope and Joy*, Daniel Ladinsky