Pray, Pray, Pray

Third Sunday of Easter (A)

Pope Francis has just been in Cairo, Egypt. He attended a peace conference of 300 religious leaders, professors and scholars from Egypt and several other countries in the region. The conference was held in the Al Azhar Conference Hall. It was largely a Muslim audience, though key Christian leaders, like Coptic Pope Tawadros II, were present. Pope Francis met with the Grand Mufti prior to addressing the conference.

Pope Francis said that religion is an instrument of peace and not of violence. He stated, “as religious leaders we are called to denounce the violations against human dignity and against human rights, to bring to light the attempts to justify every form of hatred in the name of religion and to condemn them as an idolatrous falsification of God,” who “is the God of peace.”

Another speaker at this conference was the Orthodox Patriarch, Bartholomew I. He and Pope Francis have met on several occasions and share many common approaches. The Patriarch provided a very good presentation on the place of religion in contemporary society. He listed four central ways in which religion affects human society. They are worth recalling.

He said that religion is connected with the deepest concerns of the human person. It provides answers to crucial existential questions, giving orientation and meaning of life. He said that religion “opens to human beings the dimension of eternity and that of truth.”

He makes the important point that religion is related to the identity of peoples and civilizations. This is why knowledge of the belief and religion of others is an indispensable precondition of understanding people from other cultures.

He said that religion has created and preserved the greatest cultural achievements of humanity: essential moral values, solidarity and compassion, “as well as respect of the whole creation.”

Finally, he commented that religion is a vital factor in any peace process. He commented that religion “can of course divide by causing intolerance and violence, but this is rather its failure, not its essence which is the protection of human dignity.”

In this Easter season, we celebrate the source of our Christian faith and hope – the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today’s Gospel story reminds us that the risen Lord wants to accompany us on our life’s journey, that he walks with us and explains the truth to us. We meet the real presence of the Lord in the breaking of the bread, at Holy Mass. Christian faith is about relationship with God and not only following certain moral norms. It is all about the dynamic of an interaction. It is never slavish or passive. Faith is essentially a transformative influence on human life.

We know well that our faith is a source of peace, hope and joy. It gives us a clear path to take in life and provides parameters that protect us from going astray. We know that our Catholic faith is a great blessing and a source of ongoing comfort and encouragement.

Religion, as the Patriarch Bartholomew said, lies at the heart of every civilisation. It lies at the heart of Western Civilisation and has shaped the character of our society as we know it here in Tasmania. So many of the good things we are able to enjoy in our society and which makes life in Australia and in Tasmania so attractive are the fruit of our Christian heritage.

This year marks the centenary of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to three children, Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco, at Fatima in Portugal. Over the twentieth century, the apparitions and the messages of our Lady had a great influence on the lives of many Catholics who embraced her call to say the rosary and pray for world peace. The Virgin spoke told the children that prayer can, in fact, alter the direction of history. The Fatima message has had a deep impact on Catholic devotion.

A century on, it is good to revisit the message of Fatima. It is is a message, I believe, that has relevance for us today. That prayer can change the course of history is a powerful statement. We need to be reminded that prayer can shape the direction of a society. A nation, like human life, has a spiritual underpinning. Events are not just of human making. St Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians reminds that it is not just human enemies that we have to deal with, but “the Sovereignties and Powers who originate the darkness in this world” (Eph 6:12).

I have chosen to consecrate Tasmania to the Immaculate Heart of Mary next Saturday week, May 13, the anniversary of the first apparition at Fatima. Pope Francis himself will be in Fatima on this day and he will canonise Jacinta and Francisco. He has already consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 2013. I know of other bishops around the world who have chosen to make consecrations this year.

In this consecration, which I understand has not occurred before in Tasmania, I am invoking the maternal protection of the Blessed Virgin for the people of Tasmania. The protection I particularly seek is spiritual protection against the powers of darkness. I believe this consecration will release many graces on this island.

Of course, this is no magical solution. The consecration needs to be accompanied by our prayer. Our Lady urged the young seers to prayer and penance. She particularly commended saying the Rosary. The consecration needs to be associated with our own dedication to intercessory prayer.

I want to invite you to join with me on this most important moment as Tasmania is consecrated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on May 13.

As a lead up this the parish will be having a parish mission commencing on Sunday evening, May 7 and running till Thursday, May 11. On May 12 we will be interring the mortal remains of Bishop Willson in the crypt.

The coming weeks will be an intense spiritual time. I urge you to respond to these opportunities. And pray. Pray to the Virgin Mary. Pray the Rosary. Pray for Tasmania. Pray for the mission of the Church here.

Pray. Pray. Pray.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Sunday, April 30, 2017